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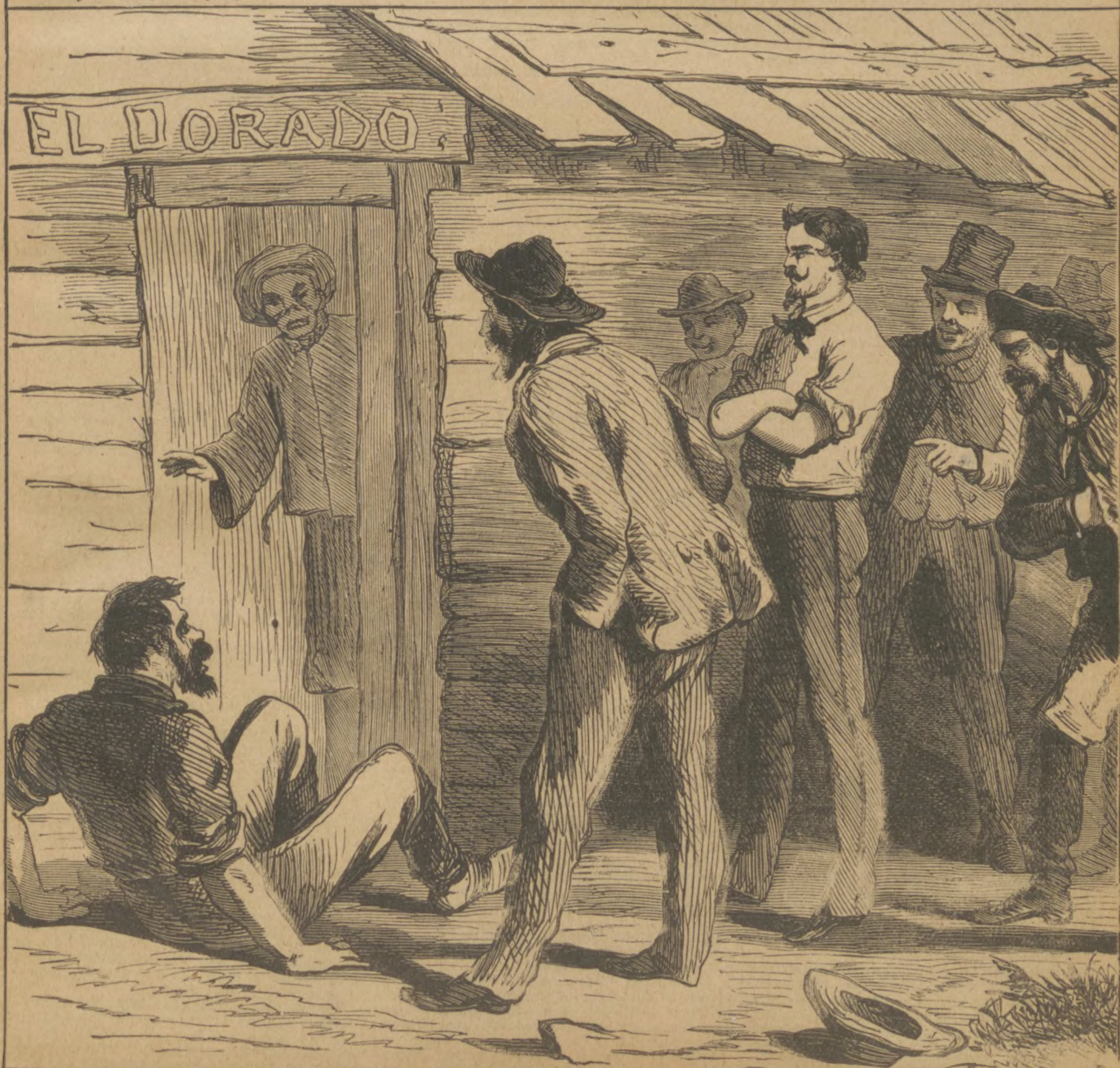
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SILKY STEELE, THE STAY-IN SPORT.

By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.



"RISE UP, WILLIAM HENRY! YOU'VE HARDLY BEGUN TO TASTE YOUR SOUP!"

Silky Steele, THE STAY-IN SPORT;

OR,

The Catch-on at Camp Climax.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "HIGH-WATER MARK," "OLD '49,"
"NOR'WEST NICK," "MAVERICK MARK,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SENSATION FOR CAMP CLIMAX.

IT was a horrible sound; neither scream, groan nor curse, but a combination of all these; a sound that betrayed fear, rage and mortal agony.

At least one other sound bore it company, in a minor key; a sharp yet soft "spat" against the board front of the Eldorado Saloon, which caused heads to duck and ears to prick with instinctive listening for the spiteful explosion of fire-arms.

"Stiddy, the bunch o' ye!" rumbled Briggs Oliphant, with a warning flash of his whisky-redened eyes over the select few with whom he had spent the major portion of that Saturday night playing poker. "It's business comes fu'st, an' I'm doin' the callin'—Keerds talk, an' thar's the dandy boys I've bin stackin' my wealth on! Who kin best 'em?"

Although there was a considerable "pot" hanging in the balance, and nearly all present were gamblers by birth or by training, only the ominous reputation borne by that black-bearded giant kept his mates from making a break for the door.

True, neither gun nor pistol had spoken aloud, and only that one "spat" had come to startle the gamblers; but other and hardly less significant sounds were to be heard, if not at the closed door itself, from close alongside that rude barrier.

"You lay over me, Big Elephant," said one of the men, facing his cards, then glancing across the room toward the front. "Whoever 'tis, he's ketched 'em turrible bad, seems if!"

A pawing, scratching sound against the rough boards; a dull bumping noise; then a choking, gasping, wheezing gurgle—hideous in itself, but doubly so when its human origin could no longer be doubted.

Briggs Oliphant greedily clutched at the stakes he had won, his savage curses for once passing unheeded as the rough-clad diggers and lower-strata sports kicked over chairs and upset tables in their hasty rush for the outer air.

Camp Climax had not yet attained the dignity of street-lamps, but the new Sabbath was dawning far away over the east, and the first of its rosy beams were mingling with the dull gray of the sky-line above the rocky range, affording light enough for the startled sports to distinguish that feebly-struggling wretch whose back was propped against the Eldorado's front.

"Old man's drunk ag'in!" recklessly laughed one of the men, as he took note of those uncertain movements. "He's got it in the neck, an' 'tain't no one skimpy quart tangled his legs up—*holy smoke!*"

Briggs Oliphant, having pocketed his final winnings, came through the open doorway with a flaring candle in his fist. The light fell squarely upon that hapless wretch, and even the black-bearded giant gave a start and an ejaculation of surprised horror, at what he thus revealed; a man, covered with blood, and seemingly in his death-agony!

"Bloody murder, begobs!"

"Who done it? Who is it? How could—"

Briggs Oliphant was first to rally, and thrusting the candle close to that face, he gave vent to another hoarse ejaculation, following it with the words:

"Mack! it's Sandy McIntosh!"

The injured wretch resumed his feeble struggles, one hand fluttering up as though to push that smoking light aside, a repetition of that horrible gurgle rising in his throat. Instead, his fingers closed upon a feathered shaft which protruded through his shaggy beard, but ere he could do more than give the weapon a faint shake, Oliphant dropped his candle to catch and restrain that hand.

"Don't ye, Sandy, fer— Clean through the thrapple, an' out t'other side!"

In his amazed excitement, Briggs Oliphant relaxed his grasp and started back. The wounded man toppled over on his left side, feebly writhing, faintly moaning, his hands quivering piteously, as though in a mute appeal for help.

"Somebody shot him—but who?"

Keen, if nervous glances swept around, but without effect. Save themselves, the entire town seemed buried in slumber, and if a secret slayer was indeed afoot, that brief delay had enabled him to escape, for the present at least.

Few of those present but what had witnessed at least one violent death, but this was something beyond the ordinary, and it was not so easy for them to rally from the shock. If slay-

er, as well as slain, had been present, matters would have taken on another aspect, and action would have been prompt and decided.

Now, as before, Briggs Oliphant was the first to rally, and his were the hands to first touch the seemingly dying wretch, his the voice that harshly bade his mates bear a hand.

"He's nobody's dog, Sandy hain't, dug-gun ye! Help me in with him to whar thar's light, an'— You, John!"

His yellow face showing an ashen pallor, a Chinaman timidly ventured forth from the building, answering that summons with a squeak:

"Allee time leady, boss! Hop Sing Di—what do?"

"Tumble out your beddin', John! Sandy hain't gwine to lay on no dirty floor while a heathen— Stiddy, boys!"

The injured man was tenderly picked up and carried into the saloon by the men, then placed upon the rude pallet which the Chinaman hastily formed out of his opium-scented bedding, his tongue not daring to utter the remonstrances his almond-shaped eyes were covertly glinting as he noted that trail of red drops crossing the sanded floor.

A faint tremor crept through that sinewy frame as it was lowered to rest, but Sandy McIntosh seemed past complaining. His breathing was rapid and labored, each rise and fall of his lungs being marked by a sickening wheeze and gurgle in his throat, while bloody bubbles at brief intervals forced themselves through his parted lips.

When brought fairly under the light, one and all could see how very little hope of recovery remained, yet what could be was done.

With the mistaken zeal of a faithful follower of King Alcohol, Briggs Oliphant tried to dose the sufferer with whisky, but gave over when a choking spasm sent the frothy blood flying past his face.

"That settles it!" he ejaculated, drawing back until his body rested on his heels as he knelt beside the fated man. "He goes back on his whisky, boys!"

"Ef he could only talk! Ef he mought only say *who* done it!"

"Make him tell, afore it's too late, Elephant!"

"Mebbe ef ye was to yank the sticker out, pard, it'd give him more room fer wind," suggested yet another of the group.

As McIntosh lay on his left side, both barb and feathered end of the arrow were visible, showing with what deadly force the missile had been sped. Stricken squarely in front, the barbed head scraping his chin as it cut through that dense beard, some of the vocal cords had been severed, almost beyond a doubt. For, shaken up by Oliphant, and made to understand what was wanted, poor McIntosh struggled desperately to speak; but in vain.

Only that husky, wheezing gurgle, rising to an unutterably horrible cry as the poor wretch realized his impotence.

Twice, thrice he made the attempt to pronounce a name, as it seemed to those who so breathlessly waited. He suddenly lifted himself to a sitting posture, grasping the feathered shaft with both hands, giving it a fierce wrench that jerked the barbed head out of sight.

It was his final effort. His hands flew up, his head sunk back, and ere his body had fairly straightened out upon the blood-stained pallet, his spirit had fled forever!

Half stunned by this frightful exhibition of desperate energy in one whom he had felt *must* be dying, Briggs Oliphant had not been able to interpose until all was over. Then he did what lay in his power to bring back the life that had fled, only giving over when all present were fully convinced the end had indeed come.

Hop Sing Di, who had early beaten a retreat behind his bar, was now called upon for drinks, and the unnerved gamblers emptied their glasses in silence. Then Oliphant spoke to the Chinaman, in subdued tones:

"Kiver his face, John, an' watch over the pore critter. Us men 've got more 'portant work on han', jest now. Come, boys!"

The black-bearded giant strode outside, baring his brow to the gentle breeze which came on the wings of the morning. He gazed half stupidly around, like one searching even this late for the secret slayer, but then, giving his muscular frame a vigorous shake, he sprang into full life and energy once more.

"'Tain't no use lookin' fer the critter what downed pore Sandy, pards, jest now, but mebbe we kin pick up some sort o' sign to make it come more bindin'. Who hearn that spat ag'inst the wall?"

One and all had heard the sound, and the light was now clear enough to guide their eyes aright in the search which followed.

A dull red blotch on the weather-beaten planks to the right of the door, and in that blotch a deep dent, from which an irregular scratch ran downward, to be lost in another and larger stain.

"Thar ye hev it, mates!" cried Briggs Oliphant, as his sluggish gaze settled on those telltale marks. "Plain as prent, or plainer!"

Thar was Sandy, moggin' 'long his easy, bresh-in' the wall with the side o' him, as a critter *will* do when he's got his load. Mebbe he was gwine to bunk in. Mebbe he 'lowed fer to drap in on John fer a clean-up ball. Mebbe this, that or t'other, fer it don't matter which!"

Oliphant placed himself in position, slouching along as indicated, then, when opposite the blood-marks, pausing, to turn sharply away from the building, facing a vacant space across the way.

"Right so done Sandy when he ketched the sight or sound; never no odds which! And right thar he ketched his sickness, an' we hearn him go—*this-a-way!*"

With startling realism "Big Elephant" gave his illustration, striking the stained boards with a horny knuckle to represent that "spat," then slowly sliding to a sitting posture, emitting a hideous series of choking moans and gurgles. More than one bronzed cheek turned a shade lighter as the grim memory was evoked, and the few citizens who had put in an appearance since the tragedy, gained a far more accurate idea of what had really taken place than they could have picked up through an hour's chatter.

A cry, low at first, but quickly rising in ferocity, called for prompt action against the foul assassin, and brought Briggs Oliphant swiftly to his feet.

"Stiddy by jerks, pards!" the black-beard rumbled, lurching to the front, then barring the way with his wide-spread arms and bulky person. "Thar's a right way o' gittin' started, an' I'll lick the fu'st critter as tries to overrun the trail! Jest wait ontel—jest wait, I say!"

He cleared a passage to the saloon door, passing through and being lost to view for a brief space. When he emerged, the blood-stained arrow was held in his hand, where all eyes could take note.

"Who done it, ye ax?" his deep notes sounding even more harsh than usual, as his redly-glowing eyes flashed from face to face. "Who could 'a' done it, save an' 'cept them as make use o' sech hide-in-the-bresh doin's as these?"

He shook the deadly missile before their eyes, then brought a huge finger-tip down on the shaft close to where the triple rows of feathers ended, his voice lowering almost to a snarl as he added:

"Who toted a skin o' jest sech p'izen tricks as this, no longer ago then yist'day? Who is Injun 'nough fer to slap it to a white man, so fashion? Who—an' it's me that axes it, gents, all! Who marks thar arrers with a letter V cut in the wood, like this?"

Only pausing long enough for those eager eyes to prove the discovery he had made, Briggs Oliphant harshly cried aloud:

"Who but Injun Molly? An' Injun Molly butchered Sandy McIntosh, or I'm a howlin' liar right from head-waters!"

"You are a liar, Big Elephant, and no living person is better aware of the fact than your own drunken self!"

CHAPTER II.

SEEKING THE SECRET SLAYER.

CLEAR and distinct came those words, yet they were uttered with a drawl, rather than in anger, and seemed in perfect keeping with their author, who just then came into fair view of the little gathering by the Eldorado.

A man, still young, since he could hardly have completed his third decade, his trim, athletic figure garbed with a neatness rarely seen in a mining-town such as Camp Climax then was; a man who looked "fresh as a daisy," though all who now saw him felt morally certain his head had not touched pillow nor his lids closed in slumber that night just spent; a man who bore "sport" written in every feature, yet one whom nature had branded a gentleman, for all.

With almost ludicrous celerity those composing the crowd scattered to either side, leaving Briggs Oliphant, arrow in hand, to confront his smiling adversary; for such words rarely passed without being backed up by still harsher arguments.

"You are a liar, Big Elephant!" repeated the sport, still smiling, still advancing with that graceful slouch; for graceful it was, in him.

"Who axed you to chip, Silky Steele?"

"General principles, Olly! When I hear a man calling a woman hard names, be that woman white, red, black or yellow, I know he lies, and I can't tell him so too quick. So—all set and waiting, pardner!"

Silky Steele came to a leisurely halt, only a few paces distant from the black-bearded giant, white hands carelessly resting at his waist, though the keenest eyes among those in front could not detect knife or pistol about his person. But all knew—and Briggs Oliphant fully as well as his mates—that Steele Slocum was not a man to utter words which he was not fully prepared to back up with deeds.

When he first caught that degrading epithet, Oliphant had instinctively grasped a revolver-butt, and had any other man in Camp Climax put in an appearance after that crisp sentence, powder would have burned and lead flown in deadly earnest. Or, as it was, had Steele Slo-

cum shown a weapon, the giant would have fought desperately, for he was by no means a coward, viewed from the ordinary standpoint.

But this insolent, smiling disregard for consequences, so characteristic of the dashing gambler, went further toward unnerving the big fellow than the open display of deadly weapons could have done. He knew that Silky Steele was reputed to carry a "mascot" of marvelous power, and that memory came just in time to check his hand.

"I hain't lookin' fer no row 'long o' you, Slocum," sulkily muttered Oliphant, his whisky-reddened eyes drooping slightly, but his jaws squaring anew as his glance touched the blood-stained arrow held in his lowered hand. "Thar's bigger work on hand than that! Thar's bin a bloody murder done right hyar, an'— Mehbe you know who butchered pore Sandy?"

Sharp and swift that query was put, but if Briggs Oliphant thought to win a point by taking the gambler off his guard, his pains were wasted. Silky Steele did not even put on a look of surprise, and that characteristic drawl was still present when he asked:

"Sandy—which?"

"Sandy McIntosh—wuss luck him, pore critter!"

"He'd ought to know which, Sandy," chipped in one of the steadily increasing crowd. "They were playing together last night."

"That's what! Make him tell, ef he don't want."

With that easy, half-sleepy smile still playing about his mustached lips Steele Slocum glanced from face to face as these sentences flashed forth with growing significance.

He knew that he was none too popular among the class of men forming that growing crowd—growing more rapidly now, as the word of a mysterious killing spread throughout the camp, one could hardly explain just how or through whom—but that knowledge made him more carelessly cool, if anything.

Briggs Oliphant seemed to gain heart as he saw how many armed men were betraying opposition to the sport, and he spoke again:

"Somebody done it, Slocum. I don't say you did, fer—"

"Wise Olly! You only need a tail, a pair of wings, and a couple of feather-horns to be a perfect owl for wisdom!" laughingly chipped in the sport.

"I hain't sayin' you done the dirty job," doggedly persisted the rough, with a half-veiled flash of his sullen eyes in that direction. "I don't reckon you *did*, fer they don't seem much Injun 'bout you. But them as stan's up fer a murderer is mighty nigh as bad, eh, pard?"

"Bet yer sweet life, Elephant!"

"An' a dug-gun sight wuss, to ray thinkin'!"

"Augh! bad luck to the blatherin' av yez ahl, sure! It's haanted we'll be foor l'avin' the rid divils craape claane away widout payin' the pinalty foor murtherin' pore Sandy Mack!"

"All set, gentlemen?" drawled Silky Steele, his dark eyes passing from face to face as those sentences came in rapid succession, his white fingers twisting the imperial that adorned his chin. "The game is made, and I'm dealing! Now—what sort of wind-pudding are you sports trying to deal a fellow, anyway?"

"Then you don't know," slowly demanded Oliphant, once more squarely meeting those dark-gray eyes. "From the way that you chipped—"

"As I said, when I hear a fellow back-capping a woman, be she white, red, black or yellow, I call him down, from general principles. Where's the *corpus delicti*, Elephant?"

"Ef you mean—"

"Who's killed, and where is the remains?"

"Sandy McIntosh, no less, an' he's in yender, with John."

Without waiting to hear more, Steele Slocum pushed past Oliphant to cross the threshold. He was placing himself at the mercy of the rough fellow whom he had so deliberately insulted, but the gambler apparently did not give that a thought.

He stooped to remove the soiled kerchief with which Hop Sing Di had covered the face of the dead, and for nearly a minute Slocum gazed upon the corpse, his face grave enough now. With one white finger he parted the clotted beard, to lay bare the fatal wound, then replaced the covering, backing out of the room, to once more face those dark, almost menacing looks.

"There's more in it than I thought, gentlemen," he spoke, gravely. "I ask your pardon if I've displayed too much levity. Now—business goes! How did it happen? Was he stabbed or shot?"

"Shot, an' hyar's the thing she done it with!" exploded Oliphant, shaking the fatal weapon in front of the gambler.

"Still harping on my daughter, Briggsy!"

"You kin own the breed ef ye like, but, darter or no darter, Injun Molly owned this arrer, fer thar's her mark! Who else totes sech on-godly weepens as them? Who else could 'a' plugged pore Sandy, ef Injun Molly didn't? An' why—"

"Why ask me?"

"Aw, her! Thar they be, right now!" exploded one of the men on the skirts of the

gathering, wildly gesticulating, drawing all eyes in the direction he was pointing out.

Two figures were visible by the first beams of the rising sun, now motionless, but with their faces turned in that direction. It looked as though they had been intending to leave town by that street, and had paused in doubt on catching sight of that unusual gathering.

With ugly cries and more than one brandished weapon, the crowd made a rush in that direction, eager for prey. But Silky Steele forced his way to the front, his own hands armed now, his face pale but hard-set as he uttered the warning:

"Go easy, gents! Ask what you please, but hands off until proof of guilt is found! Remember, one is a woman, and—"

One was a woman, but she was something more, just then. With arrow to string, and bow bent sharply, she sprang in front of her shrinking companion, boldly facing the rushing mob as she cried clearly:

"Back! No hurt—me shoot!"

One of the leading men, from his position at one side, swiftly cast a knife whose keen edge cut the dried sinews, causing the bent bow to spring back and its owner to stagger with lost balance. And before she could rally, Silky Steele was up to the spot, hastily crying:

"Easy, all around! One murder can't be cured by another, and I'm backing fair play! To our side, all white men!"

"Face 'em with Sandy! All we want is common jestic, an' that I'm howlin' fer, d'ye mind, now!"

"We hain't done nobody no harm, gents," quavered the shrinking figure in whose defense Injun Molly had taken such a bold stand. "We was jest goin' away fer to—jest goin' back to our home in the hills—an' Molly didn't know—she reckoned you meant harm to the old man, ye see, gents, an' so—"

"That's all right, Peter Bell," interrupted Oliphant, one huge hand closing on the old man's shoulder, forcing him along toward the Eldorado. "You nur Molly shain't come to no harm ef you kin show up clean han's. I'm tellin' ye so, an' I'm Big Elephant!"

Silky Steele, the instant he saw that milder measures than he at first had feared were coming into play, hung back until he was nearly in the rear of all the crowd. His eyes were keenly though covertly watching the two prisoners, lingering longest upon the woman, however.

Apparently having entirely forgotten the gambler, Briggs Oliphant took command, a few stern words making a clear passage for the trio back to and inside of the shanty where poor McIntosh lay stiffening in death.

Peter Bell shrunk tremblingly from the corpse, a low moan escaping his lips as he seemed to recognize that pain-distorted countenance. But Injun Molly, after one instinctive recoil, gazed coldly upon the dead man, then boldly, unflinchingly meeting the stern gaze of Oliphant.

"Why shoot? He friend. Nebbers shoot! Dat lie—bad lie!"

Slipping a hand through the arm of her companion, Injun Molly, with lips close to his ear, seemed to lend him much needed strength by a few swiftly-whispered words, for he braced up amazingly the moment they had crossed that threshold to the open air.

Briggs Oliphant was at the other side, and he, too, muttered a few words in secret:

"The boys'll lynch ye both ef I don't stand yer fri'nd, Peter! Tell me whar yer secret bonanza lays, an' I'll save the necks o' ye both!"

"We didn't do it, gents!" exclaimed Peter Bell, at last showing some little spirit as he jerked free from that grim grasp. "We never harmed poor Sandy! How could we, when he was our fri'nd—the onliest fri'nd we've got in all this world, I reckon! It's jest a put-up job! Han's off, critter!" with a feebly-fierce defense against Oliphant, whose clutch was again fastening upon his arm. "I'll never tell ye! I hain't got no bonanza! I don't know nothin'!"

"Who did butcher pore Sandy, then?" savagely demanded Oliphant, at the same time drawing that arrow from his belt and shaking it before his prisoners. "This killed Sandy McIntosh! This, mind ye, both! An' it's got Injun Molly's private totem onto it, too!"

"Who did kill Sandy ef they didn't?" howled another miser.

"Whar's a rope! Hang 'em up a bit, an' they'll tell, fast 'nough!"

"Go slow, gentlemen!" again chipped Silky Steele, pressing forward. "I can't swear just who sent Sandy over the range, but I'd a mighty sight sooner believe Big Elephant did the deed than either of these poor creatures!"

Briggs Oliphant was swift with his *alibi*, and he had ample witnesses to back up his statement. He could not possibly have done the deed, for he was playing poker inside the saloon at the very moment that death-wound was inflicted.

"I mought come back at you with a mighty sight better show," Steele Slocum, was his retort, "but I'm after the truth, no less! An' so I say it ag'in: show clean paws, you critters, or go up a tree!"

"Give them time, can't you?" frowningly

asked Slocum. "What sort of a show are you giving them, anyhow?"

"What sort o' show did Injun Molly give Sandy McIntosh?"

"That's the way to talk it down!" cried another rough. "Whar was they when Sandy ketched his death? Who put that arrer in his thrapple, ef the squaw didn't?"

An ugly, wicked yell was rising to the death-yell, when a sharp, stern voice rose above the ominous sounds, and its owner came shouldering his way through the excited gathering with the demand:

"Hold hard, here! What's all this racket about, anyway?"

CHAPTER III.

BIG ELEPHANT AND HIS MASTER.

"JUST the man we feel the need of most, judge!" briskly called out Steele Slocum, as the new-comer pushed himself more prominently into view. "While I can buck a regiment at a pinch, I do like to have an honest gentleman hold my clothes!"

"It's your mix, then, Silky Steele?" the rown deepening upon his strong face as his eyes flashed swiftly around that immediate circle, to rest a bit longer on Injun Molly and her trembling companion. "What's the matter with you, Peter Bell?"

"Honor bright, jedge, we never done it!"

"Done what? Speak out, somebody! You, Briggs Oliphant, for lack of a better man! What's that arrow got to do with it, and why are you— Talk out, man, can't you?"

"It's got all to do with it, Jedge Ramsey, an' Injun Molly—"

"She plugged Sandy McIntosh, fer keeps, jedge, an' he's a-layin' in John's, thar, deader'n a hull kit o' mack'rell! I'll show ye—"

"Big Elephant says they turned the trick, but they swear the contrary, jedge," chipped in Slocum, in his easy, off-hand manner. "Let alone that's two to one, I'd heap sight quicker think Briggsy a liar, than Peter and his frau."

"McIntosh killed, you say? When did it happen?"

"Jest at the crack o' day, jedge, an' right thar whar ye kin see the bloody marks with the own two eyes o' ye this holy minnit!" spluttered Oliphant, brandishing the fatal arrow wildly as he set out to give all the details thus far arrived at; only to be cut short by Aaron Ramsey.

"At crack of day? That means before sunrise, of course?"

"A full hour, pritty nigh," admitted Oliphant, though with evident reluctance. "Some o' the boys 'lowed Sandy was drunk, ontel I fetched out a candle in the fist o' me. But then—"

"Then neither Peter Bell nor Injun Molly had aught to do with the killing," positively declared Ramsey, striking down the hairy paw with which Oliphant was once more claiming his prisoners. "I gave them a bunk-down in my office last night, and I can make oath they never left the building until the sun was showing its face this morning!"

"Good for our side!" cried Silky Steele, betraying more enthusiasm than at any prior moment. "Fall to the rear and chew your cud, Big Elephant, for this sweet morsel has cheated your lips!"

"But—the arrer is Molly's!"

"Lost or stolen—who knows?" Judge Aaron Ramsey flung over his shoulder as, supported by the handsome gambler, he escorted Peter Bell and the red-skin woman through that disconcerted crowd. "Either way, I'm going bail for Injun Molly. I know she couldn't have shot Sandy before sunrise, and all who even hint she did, must face me down first."

Briggs Oliphant had no answer ready, and none of the rest ventured to openly oppose Judge Ramsey, backed as he was by that cool, careless, fearless sport. And so, without a hand being lifted to stay their steps, the quartette passed away from the scene of the mysterious slaying, leaving the crowd to take a fresh start in their search for justice.

Oliphant seemed cowed by the rebuff he had received, and listened in sulkily silence to the various suggestions offered by the more volatile members. No one ventured to express so much as a doubt concerning the perfect sincerity of Judge Ramsey. If he declared that Injun Molly was innocent of causing Sandy McIntosh's death, so it surely must be.

It appeared to be a case of many minds for as many men, and much time was cut to waste before anything like a plan of procedure was agreed upon. And when that did occur, it seemed but little better than a forlorn hope.

The body of the murdered man was left in care of Hop Sing Di, the Chinaman, for the present, and all admission denied outsiders.

Camp Climax was to be searched throughout for any or all others who were at all likely to call such a weapon into play, and if any such were found, they were to be arrested and brought before a selected committee, there to prove an *alibi* or pay the full penalty.

Briggs Oliphant took but a lukewarm part in this discussion and the quest which followed, though he slouched through the crowd, with now and then a muttered word for such of his boon companions as he chanced to meet.

And, with rare exceptions, those congenial spirits thereafter kept fairly close connection with the black-bearded giant, moving as he moved, keen-eyed and open-eared, like men who anticipated brisk work lying not far ahead of them.

Once a plan of action was decided upon, little time was cut to waste by the citizens. One and all they wished to avenge the untimely taking off of poor Sandy McIntosh, and while they demanded only justice, perhaps 'twas just as well that no plausible subject presented himself.

Briggs Oliphant, with a select few of his cronies, once more came together at the Eldorado Saloon, and the presence of that cold, inanimate shape lying on the opium-scented pallet could not hinder them from drinking repeatedly at the rude bar presided over by Hop Sing Di.

"Course they hev'n't ketched nobody!" Big Elephant repeated, with an ugly, sneering chuckle, as he thumped the bar with his emptied glass. "Fer why? thar wasn't nobody but Injun Moll or Cracked Bell to find."

"But—the jedge goes tha'r bail, Briggsy."

"An' why did he do that? An' why did Silky Steele back him up? Why, I'm axin' ye, gents? I'll tell ye, sence nary one o' ye all hes got grit or gumption 'nough fer to spit out the clean truth! Bec'ase Injun Molly is Injun Molly!"

Not so much in the words alone, but when backed by that ugly leer, those sneering tones, his meaning could not be mistaken, even by those of most sluggish wit.

"An', bein' Injun Molly, what does the jedge care fer pore Sandy? Why wouldn't Steele Slocum back him up, when he see he couldn't make the rifle by his lonesome self? They both lied to save her, but—"

"Lying won't save your hide now, Big Elephant!" cried a stern voice, as the nearly closed front door was kicked wide open, to reveal the neatly-clad gambler at the threshold, pistols drawn and at full-cock. "Swallow your foul hints or chew lead, you vile cur!"

Oliphant, taken completely by surprise, recoiled against the bar, one arm instinctively rising to shield his face, but made no attempt to draw a weapon. He saw death in those blazing gray eyes, and he knew that any such motion on his part would surely bring a shot to his brain.

"Don't—I hain't—gi' me a show, dug-gun ye, critter!" he gasped, in sulky terror.

"Swallow those words, I tell you, Big Elephant," sternly repeated the gambler, holding Oliphant covered with one pistol, the other smoothly waving back and forth so as to cover the giant's mates in turn. "Say you have been mouthin' nothing but lies, all day. Say it, or croak!"

"I've bin lyin'—all day!" hoarsely muttered the bully.

"The truth saves your life, Elephant, unless the unaccustomed dose turns on your stomach and you again spit forth your natural venom. If you do—and I should hear of it—I'll mix you a still more bitter pill than this."

Leaning lightly against the door-casing, but still holding his guns ready for swift use in case of need, Silky Steele added, in almost musical tones:

"You're worse than a liar, Big Elephant, for you're a fool. If a single grain of sense lurked beneath that over-populated thatch of yours, you'd never have lifted a yelp against your betters without making sure their ears could never trip you up with the truth. You are a coward, or you'd never abuse a woman behind her back. You are the worst of curs, else you'd never stand and take the back-capping I'm giving you, with your own chosen gang standing by as witnesses."

"You ketched me off guard," sulkily mumbled Oliphant.

"You've had warning enough, surely! You're heeled, as I am. Step outside now, pull your guns, and show yourself a man—if you dare!"

Silky Steele stepped back far enough to leave the passage clear, though still holding his adversary under easy cover in case desperation should force him to a dangerous break. But Briggs Oliphant seemed in no great haste to pick up the gauntlet.

Though he stepped to the threshold, his hands were held out, empty of knife or gun, and there was a perceptible quaver in his hoarse tones as he uttered:

"I cain't match you that-a-way, Mr. Slocum, an' right well you knows it, too! I'm more'n hafe drunk, an' ef I was clean sober, I ain't sayin' you couldn't shoot all 'round me. But—ef you dast to lay down them guns a bit, I kin an' will—"

"Slap it to me from under cover, of course, Big Elephant?"

"Not while I'm on deck, he won't!" cried a brisk voice, as a burly figure hurried up to the scene. "What's the row, Slocum?"

"Nothing much; just trying to show Big Elephant yonder who's his master. But he won't play, worth a cent!"

"I kin do ye up the best day ye ever saw, ef you'll lay off them weepsons. I cain't shoot with ye, but I kin lick ye all over!"

"In your dreams, Briggsy!"

"Ye don't dast to resk it, though! You kin ketch the drop onto a man from ahind, but when it comes to bone a muskle an'—I kin lick ye with one han' tied ahind me!" vociferated Oliphant, growing more eager as he saw, or fancied he saw, a reluctance to meet him on such terms.

"Hold my tools, Matson, and waste a cartridge if Big Elephant tries to jump the ring before I've given him his full dose of gruel," lightly cried the sport, voluntarily relinquishing the advantage he held, seemingly without a thought of failure or danger to himself. "Shed your linen, Olly, for I'm going to give you a rare old thumping—surely!"

Although he was a bit taken aback by the business-like tone and the readiness with which the trim-built sport removed his outer garments for the fray, Oliphant cut little time to waste in making his preparations.

He passed his weapons over to a friend, rolled up his shirt-sleeves and doffed his hat, then stepped forth to face Silky Steele, who smilingly asked:

"How do you prefer it, Big Elephant? According to rule, or rough-and-tumble? Don't be bashful, for I'm—"

"My meat, dug gun ye!" snarlingly cried the giant, plunging forward, with brawny arms guarding his face, but hands ready to close upon that agile figure. "I'll smash ye dead—ugh!"

With a graceful bend and twist, Silky Steele ducked below that guard, planting a fist just above Oliphant's belt with a force that extorted a loud grunt of mingled rage and pain. Involuntarily those hairy arms lowered, and once more erect, Slocum rained straight and hot shot fairly upon that swarthy face, knocking the giant dizzily back, following him up pace by pace, one sinewy arm easily brushing aside those wild strokes, while the other kept driving its steel-like fist true to the mark, now no better than a bloody mask.

"You don't call *this* fighting, do you, Elephant?" mocked the sport, his tones as free and easy as though their master was standing at rest. "I haven't had so much fun since I had the itch! But you—your arms are not tied, man, dear! Then why don't you put them to some use?"

"Ef I kin—ketch hold—I'll smash—"

"Spit out that hot mush, and talk so a Christian can understand you, Elephant!" cut in Steele, landing a blow that sent his adversary reeling back against the wall of the Eldorado. "Is it to take hold of me you want? All right—come and see me, darling beauty!"

With a light, reckless laugh, Silky Steele lowered his arms, permitting Oliphant to rush savagely to a close; but with all his seeming carelessness, Slocum secured his favorite grip, and after a brief if desperate struggle, he twisted the giant from his footing, hurling him headlong to the hard ground, then standing with folded arms, laughing pleasantly as he awaited the next move.

It was a terrible fall, and more than one of those looking on felt serious doubts as to whether Briggs Oliphant would ever lift his head in life again.

Not so Silky Steele. Past experience told him that men of that caliber were hard to kill, and standing at his ease, he watched the slow recovery of his bulky antagonist, finally remarking:

"Rise up, William Henry! You've hardly begun to taste your soup, and the rest may be harder to swallow if you let it get cold!"

Oliphant struggled to a sitting posture, staring bewilderedly at his conqueror, but then a spiteful explosion rung forth, and Slocum staggered back with a sharp cry, both hands flying up to his own head!

CHAPTER IV.

STEALING A SPORT.

As almost invariably happens under like circumstances, there was a headlong scattering of the crowd the instant a shot was fired, and even bluff Tom Matson looked to his own safety rather than giving thought to his stricken friend and fellow-sport, just then.

With a howl of terror the nearly-blinded giant scrambled on all-fours into the saloon, upsetting Hop Sing Di, who had been watching the fight with guarded protrusion of his head and shoulders through the partially-closed opening.

Silky Steele, his eyes blurred by unusual moisture, brought up against the side of the shanty, one hand clearing his vision, the other clutching at his chin, which stung and smarted as though a red-hot iron had been thrust through it.

And uttering a shrill, vindictive cry, a slender, gaudy-garbed figure rushed across the street, pistol in hand and covering the gambler, just then helpless to defend himself.

"At last, thief of my sister!" shrilly screamed the new-comer, the words blending with a second explosion, the bullet striking the plank wall with a vicious spat! "At last! Thou diest, accursed dog!"

For the third time that pointed hammer fell, but the shell failed to respond, and when its owner essayed to recock the weapon, the cylin-

der jammed, and played the would-be avenger false.

"Hold! you infernal—" spluttered Slocum, ducking his head just in time to escape the hurled weapon.

Discarding the faithless revolver, its owner flashed forth a long, slender stiletto, springing upon the gambler with all the viciousness displayed by an infuriated wildcat, striking full at his throat.

Though hardly able to hold his own after the serious shock he had received, Silky Steele managed to catch that wrist before the weapon reached its mark, and he forced the arm back, despite the furious struggles of his assailant, from whose lips poured a torrent of Spanish words and oaths.

How the affair would have terminated, had the parties been left alone to settle it, would be hard to decide, but with a clatter and a rush, a body of riders came plunging down the street, whooping and yelling like drunken lunatics, yet acting in perfect concert, had any of those nigh been cool enough to take critical note.

Silky Steele had his hands full keeping that ugly blade from finding a living sheath, and he did not realize what fresh peril menaced him until it was too late to fight against falling a victim.

Shooting as they yelled, with "perfect looseness," scattering the bewildered citizens like chaff before a whirly-gust, the horsemen came plunging down the street, several of them swooping upon those desperately struggling figures, just as Slocum hurled his assailant reeling away, the stiletto dropping to the ground between them.

One muscular centaur bent low in his saddle, shooting an arm around that slender waist, lifting the avenger up before him, giving a yell and a laugh in wild concert as his good steed dashed on without check or falter.

At the same instant a brace of *riatas* whirled through the air, the twin loops dropping over the head and shoulders of the still confused gambler, pinning both arms tight, then jerking him from his feet as the mad riders sped onward, drawing in the taut ropes until their grip fastened fairly upon that vainly struggling form.

Back came other shots, sending the few lingering citizens to cover in hot haste, and, with their two captives, the masked riders thundered on down the street and out of Camp Climax without a single shot being sent back at them.

A raid was never more successfully carried out than this, and it was fated to be many a long day before Camp Climax should hear the last of the exploit!

As for Steele Slocum, though playing such a prominent part in the affair, he could hardly be said to comprehend just what had or what was then transpiring.

That first shot had thoroughly upset his wits. He was conscious of being hit: it seemed as though a cannon-ball had torn away the whole lower part of his face.

The severed nerves sent a thrill of horrible agony up through his brain, filling his eyes with scalding tears and crazing even while it dulled his wits.

His struggle with the avenger, assassin, whichever that might prove, had been purely mechanical, and before he could more than begin to rally from that terrible shock, those cutting loops had jerked him from his feet, putting him to fresh torture such as few men have been unfortunate enough to experience.

As his yelling kidnappers dashed on, leaning apart and stretching hard on their *riatas* in order to lift his struggling body high enough for a third horseman to ride up and jerk it across his pommel, it seemed as though his body must surely fall in two pieces before that terrible strain was slackened.

Helpless as a new-born babe, Steele Slocum lay balanced across that saddle and those muscular thighs, one heavy hand boring into his back lest he fall or plunge voluntarily to earth; and thus he rode until the raiders had fairly swung clear of Camp Climax, leaving that town humming like an angry swarm of hornets with never a subject in sight for their poisoned stingers.

For nearly a mile further that reckless pace was maintained, but then, as there were no signs of pursuit being made, a halt was called, and the stolen sport was unceremoniously dumped to the ground, where a brace of masked figures were ready to receive it.

Slocum heard some gruff words, but he failed to catch their import. He was too nearly dead for that, just then. All he wanted was permission to draw his last gasps in peace and quietude.

If he had been less roughly handled, those masked riders would hardly have found him such an easy man to handle, and the sport would surely have fought against that damp cloth, with its sickish-sweet scent.

Instead, he yielded stupidly, and it was an unconscious captive which the masked riders so carefully bound and blindfolded before hoisting him into a saddle and mounting a long-armed mask on the crupper to hold the swaying figure and guide the horse on its way.

The journey through the hills and narrow defiles was a long one, and thoroughly as Steele Slocum had been drugged before it fairly began, his senses were coming back to him before its end was reached. His immediate guard discovered and made this fact known, but the mask in authority only gave a surly growl and the words:

"No matter! Just keep his hood on, though we'd have mighty little to dread from his tongue, even if he could map the entire route on his brain. Still tongues tell no tales!"

Steele Slocum did not rally sufficiently to even attempt to take notes, though his shivering frame had warned his captors of some such danger. He did not know when that long, rough ride came to an end, nor was he conscious when strong arms lifted him from the saddle and bore him through a gloomy passage, leaving the bright light of day far behind them.

His first glimmer of sense came later than all this, and as his lids, feeling strangely heavy and curiously stiff, slowly lifted from his eyeballs, the dim light baffled his brain for a few minutes.

Even then he could hardly be said to have recovered his senses. He lay like one under a spell, his lids barely parted enough for his eyes to gaze dully, sleepily before him.

He was lying on his back, and his face was turned upward, though his head was supported by a roll of furs or fuzzy blanket. He could only see a few rough points of rock, cast into alternate light and shadow by a light as yet unseen. Nor did he try to catch sight of that light. He was content to lie and stare dully at that broken roof above his head.

Only until the low sound of human voices came to his ears, for then life flowed more quickly, and his dulled wits returned with wondrous rapidity.

Like a revelation it all flashed upon his brain; the fight with Briggs Oliphant over Injun Molly, the shot and the exquisite pain, the vicious rush of the would-be assassin, the charge of the horsemen, then all that had followed up to the moment when his senses finally yielded to that insidious drug.

And now—where was he? Who were those persons talking so near his resting-place, yet hidden from his sight?

Feeling almost himself again, Silky Steele slowly, cautiously turned his head until he could twist his eyes far enough to one side to catch those figures, standing almost directly under the rude chandelier of candles fastened to a point of rock.

A man and a woman; so much his first glance told him, though both persons wore the garb usually sacred to the sterner sex; but no man ever wore such long, silken masses of jetty hair; no man ever boasted a skin so clear, so smooth, so richly suffused between ear and lip as did yonder gayly-rigged-out cavalier!

"Mexican—the tiger-cat!" muttered the sport, below his breath, as his veiled eyes took rapid note of all these points. "Who is she? Why did she tackle me so fiercely? Surely—did I ever see her before to-day?"

He felt almost convinced to the contrary, but, owing to an abrupt change of position on her part, Slocum could not be entirely sure.

Of the other figure, he made no guess, for only a broad pair of shoulders, a shapely back and trim limbs were visible to him; of head he could say even less, for that was masked by a broad-brimmed hat, the crown of which was turned his way.

"Not a fool—far from it, senora," the mask was saying, when the gambler bent his ears to hearkening, even while taking visual notes. "Only—mistaken!"

"'Tis false, senor!" angrily flashed the woman, her small right hand clinched and making a passionate gesture in keeping with her words. "Have I hunted the accursed *ladron* for so long, only to—"

Silky Steele was the involuntary cause of that incomplete sentence. As he heard that sharp, shrill, yet really musical voice, it seemed to touch a long-forgotten chord of memory, and as he sought to pick up the broken thread, his right hand mechanically stole upward to twist at a point his pet imperial, as was his wont when he had cause for study or keen thought.

Instead of closing upon the silken tuft, his thumb and finger rasped against some linen substance, and a thrill of pain shot up from chin to temples, wringing an involuntary ejaculation from his lips.

"On guard! cover!" harshly cried the man, whirling his companion around and into the deeper shadow. "The devil is coming back to life, and he must not— On guard, I say!"

"Gone! my mascot gone!" exploded the gambler, half in rage, half in grief such as only a thoroughbred sport can fully appreciate under similar circumstances.

As he spoke his hand tremblingly felt of his denuded chin, where that highly-prized imperial no longer flourished. In its place was a patch of courtplaster, crossed and neatly adhering, covering a wound which, just then, Silky Steele never gave a second thought.

The man, having guarded his companion as

far as practicable, turned and strode nearer the pallet of skins and blankets on which Steele Slocum was resting, the flickering candles shining blankly upon the sable mask which covered his face to the chin, below which hung a mass of hair, yellow as gold and fine as corn-silk.

The gambler flashed a fierce glance toward him, partially rising from the couch as he sharply demanded:

"Look here, you black-a-vised rascal, you! What sort of deal is this you're giving a gentleman, I'd like to know?"

"That mostly depends on how you accept the cards dealt out to your hand, my dear fellow," came the response, in deep, almost rumbling tones, vastly unlike the one which Slocum had caught but a few moments earlier.

"By which you mean to insinuate—just what?"

"Well, for one thing, your pay, reward, punishment, call it how you please, will depend pretty much on yourself. If you are wise enough to take the right side, you'll come up smiling, on top the heap. If you elect the other—well, instead of up, you'll go down—down to stay until Gabriel toots his horn!"

Before Slocum could say more, the woman in the garb of a Mexican cavalier darted forward, knife in hand, as though on murder bent!

CHAPTER V.

A TALKATIVE NIGHTMARE.

"ROSINA! Give to me back my sister, son of a thousand devils!"

Tones and action were fitly mated, and there was death in those flashing orbs as the woman sprung forward, steel quivering above her head in readiness for the vengeful stroke the instant those active feet should carry her within arm's-length.

Even if Silky Steele had failed to recognize her before, he surely would have been wiser now, for this was the same shrill voice, that the same tiger-cat leap of his Camp Climax experience. But now he was better able to meet and foil that vicious attack, and with a single deft movement he clutched the rude pillow upon which his head had been resting, hurling it forward to strike the avenger fairly in the face, blinding her for the moment, and checking her pantherish spring.

"I say, you fellow!" Slocum called out, to the mask, in sulky tones. "If that scratch-cat is any worth to you, muzzle her, for if I have to do it, she'll—"

"Devil! Son of Satan!" the woman gasped, rallying and dashing that novel blinder aside. "My sister! Give me back my sister, or—"

"Peace, senora!" cried the mask, deftly clasp- ing her waist with an arm as she renewed her venomous rush, his other hand claiming that bit of glittering steel. "You shall have full vengeance—I swear it by your glorious beauty—but not just now! He must talk, and—"

"He must die! I have sworn it by the Holy Mother! He shall die the death of a thousand dogs! But—Rosina! My sister! My heart is weeping tears of blood for thee!"

"That's all right, pardner," called out Slocum, testing his limbs and feeling considerably more confident when he found himself but little the worse for wear, so far as they were concerned. "But if she's worth any bother on your part at all, just you hold your grip! She's done devilry enough for one spit-cat. I'll twist her neck if she tries to claw me again—woman or not!"

He caught her eyes over the shoulder of the mask, his own face thrown into strong relief by the candles beyond. The woman gave a short, gasping ejaculation, ceasing her struggles, seemingly forgetful of her friend and captor while staring half-bewilderedly at the gambler.

"'Tis he! Surely I am not— Yet—those eyes!"

She relinquished her grasp on the stiletto, at the same time slipping from those arms with an eel-like twist and squirm. She sprung across to where Steele Slocum sat on his pallet, ready to use his hands in self-defense in case of need, but otherwise meeting that burning gaze without evasion.

"Thou art—thou must be he!" she panted, half-recoiling, one hand pressing tightly over her heart.

"I'm a he, easy enough, ma'am," admitted the sport, in tones unusually sour for one of his sunny disposition, as his hand fell away from his injured chin. "But I'm not *your* he, and I'm thundering glad of it! If I was, I'd murder you, or kill myself in self-defense!"

With a swift motion the Spanish woman caught his shoulders, pushing his head back until their gaze might squarely meet under the candle-light. A half-score seconds thus, then she recoiled, with a choking cry of amazed doubt and disappointment, crying:

"Wrong! 'Tis not Hernando Bernal! His eyes were black, while these are gray! 'Tis not— Mary, Mother, show thy poor child the truth!"

As the excited woman fell back, the man in the mask advanced, one hand lifted in a gesture warning the gambler not to arise.

"Just as you are, pardner," he said, in that curiously deep-toned voice. "If this isn't exact-

ly Liberty Hall, we're seldom sticklers for ceremony, and you are—"

"Half white and free-born, though your treatment don't fay in any too well with that fact! May I ask, in all politeness, what the deuce you mean by all this dirty work, anyhow?"

"Tit for tat is a mighty good rule to steer by, so—what the foul fiend do you mean by wearing another man's face?"

"Meaning— Then she *isn't* clean cracked?" in lowered tones asked the sport, with a glance toward the Spanish woman.

As he did this, his hand mechanically rose to his chin, and a low but fierce curse parted his lips as he felt his loss anew.

"A mere scratch, pardner," said the mask, misinterpreting his meaning, quite naturally. "You were foolish enough to get mixed up in our affairs, you see! We couldn't take one without fetching both, for there was mighty little time to waste in untangling you two. And then—well, the lady had barked your chin a bit, and the easiest way to patch up the hurt was to play barber: see?"

"Play the devil, you mean!" sulkily snarled the sport, his head dropping with little less than utter dejection. "You've knocked the whole world out of gear so far as I'm concerned: now put on the cap-sheaf and pitch me to the buzzards!"

"Even stranger things than that have happened, old fellow," the mask grimly said; but before he could do or say more the Spanish woman once more sprung to the front, resolved yet dreading to set all hopes and doubts at rest.

In one hand she clasped a candle, thrusting it forward so close to the prisoner's face that he involuntarily recoiled a bit: only for an instant, however. Then, meeting the ordeal squarely, Steele Slocum said:

"Crazy or not, you're a woman, and as such I say—play!"

If she heard, the woman did not heed. She was gazing feverishly into those dark-gray eyes by the light of the candle, then taking note of each strong feature in turn; but as often she came back to the eyes, disappointed by what she saw, yet unable to abandon all hope.

"Hernando Bernal, what hast thou done with Rosina? Where is my poor sister? Dog of— Speak!"

"One of a kind is just that much too many for me, thank you, ma'am," bowed the sport, with real or admirably-assumed carelessness. "I reckoned I'd met up with a powerful streak of bad luck, but if your sister is cut off the same piece of goods, I'm 'way up in G along of not knowing that same wingless angel!"

The woman turned toward the mask, hands clasping her temples, rage, doubt, perplexity all struggling for the mastery as she muttered:

"Ask him—force the truth, dear señor! Rosina—I must know the fate of my poor sister, and only from the lips of Hernando Bernal can that truth be extracted! Make him confess, dear friend!"

The mask gently led her further away from the pallet, then came back to his prisoner like one determined to get at the bottom facts, let the cost be what it might.

"You understand Spanish, pardner?" were his first words. "I reckoned as much! Then—spit out the truth and save trouble."

"Hernando Bernal? That ought to spell Ferdinand Bernard, in white man's lingo," thoughtfully muttered the gambler, then squarely meeting the gaze which came through twin apertures in that sable mask. "I'm not the man. I never even heard of such a person before. I never knew a woman named Rosina. Is that plain enough for your Majesty?"

"If the unadorned truth, it surely ought to be!"

"It's the naked truth, without frill, flounce or fig-leaf."

"Who are you, then, if not that lady's game?"

"Myself; whose dog are you?"

That blunt demand extorted a short, hard laugh from the masked lips. A brief silence followed, but when it was broken, one could hardly say that the words spoken were meaningless.

"It's dangerous information you're fishing for, stranger, but since you'll never carry the news, all right! I'm Major Nightmare!"

"Thief, robber, road-agent, scoundrel-in-general, eh?"

"Careful, you fool!"

"Oh, I'm good as dead, you know," with a light laugh. "Once condemned, a poor devil is humored to the top of his bent. Don't go back on your craft, Jack Ketch!"

"You're playing that for a joke, but it's nearer earnest than you may care to believe, old man! Fact is, pardner— What did you say your real name was?"

"I didn't say, but I'm not at all ashamed of it. I'm Steele Slocum, half white and free-born. A more quiet, peaceable fellow never drew the breath of life, so long as he is given half a shake; but there is a limit, and you might as well know it now as later."

"It's hardly worth while, Slocum. Fact is, women are bad luck to you, and you've hit a

streak that will carry you clear over the divide!"

"I want to know!"

"You will know! In fact, you know too mighty much already!"

"Meaning just what, gentle Nightmare?"

"Right there you have it, Slocum! You know I'm Major Nightmare. You know where we free-riders make our home. You know—Never mind further particulars! All is summed up in that word: you know too mighty much for your own health!"

"Oh, come off! What's the use in dealing from the bottom, just because you've got the deck in your own hands?"

"I've got to do it—just got to, you see!" coldly asserted the masked outlaw. "To carry out your own metaphor, it's a game of cut-throat, and I'm in it to win, not lose, you bet! See?"

"I'm worrying more about my being in it; against my own will, too, please bear in mind!"

"And mine, if I'd had a chance to object. Unfortunately I couldn't take part in the little circus, and my representative clears himself by swearing that you two were so terribly tangled up that he couldn't well carry off one without taking the other along. So, as I hinted, women seem to be your bad medicine, Slocum!"

"I'll admit so much; and more than that, as make-weight! I'll swear to never touch or be touched by that same woman while water runs and grass grows! But—to hark back, major: give me a show, can't you?"

"How can I, man?"

"Just as easy as trying! I'm not nearly so smart as you give me credit for being. I was knocked silly by that—by the lady's shot. I knew that a whirly-gust of some sort picked me up, and that's about all I did know, up to my waking, a few minutes since. And all I've learned since then wouldn't break the bank, surely?"

"You've learned that I'm Major Nightmare, chief of the Bad Dreams!"

"But you're such an infernal liar that I can't even begin to believe you, man, dear!" expostulated the sport, earnestly.

"Don't stretch your license too far, Slocum!"

"All right, my hearty! I've tried to sing you softly, now I'll give you a shout right from the amen corner! I'm Slocum by name, and slow-to-come by nature, but when I do come, I'm in to stay!"

"All of which means—just what?"

"That my life may not be worth much to the world in general, but it is all I've got, consequently well worth bargaining for. Turn me loose with wind in my lungs and my head straight on my shoulders, and I'll take your own oath to seal my lips and forget all I've seen or heard since your fellows burned their first card. Isn't that white?"

"And if I decline your offer?"

"Oh, come, major! you wouldn't cut up so infernally rusty as that?"

"Still, if I should?"

"Then I'll play for all there is in sight, curse you!" hotly exclaimed the sport, and his muscles were gathering for the leap which would send him at the throat of the masked outlaw, when he was checked by the sound of hasty footsteps coming in that direction.

Instinctively divining that desperate impulse, Major Nightmare recoiled a pace, one gloved hand dropping to a pistol at his waist. But he, too, caught those sounds, and like Steele Slocum he accepted the armistice.

A burly figure sprang into the light, one dirty paw flying up to his black-cowled head by way of salute as he caught sight of his chief, but before he could speak, Major Nightmare uttered a warning growl:

"Easy, you ass! There are other ears gaping besides mine, and—"

"I've buttoned both of mine close, major!" sung out Slocum. "I couldn't hear an angel sing, let alone an imp from—dreamland!"

Major Nightmare paid no attention to this speech, but drew the man aside, bending his ear to receive the communication which called for such headlong haste. It surely could have been of no pleasing nature, judging from his harsh tones, a moment later:

"Stay here and keep an eye on this fellow, boy! Treat him white as may be, but don't give him a chance to slip through your fingers. If he should—well, you'll pull hemp in his place!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE STAY-IN SPORT PLAYS A TRUMP.

WITHOUT pausing for a reply, Major Nightmare passed out of sight beyond the limits of the dimly-burning candles. Unless the echo of his footfalls lied, he passed on without stopping at the limits of that rocky chamber, for Silky Steele counted fully two-score steps before his keen ears were foiled by the increasing distance.

Still, he knew that men who took their lives in their hands were full of tricks and exceeding crafty, and he did not at once accept that diminishing sound as proof positive that the outlaw chieftain had indeed taken his departure

for good and all. It might be only a ruse, to see if the sport was desperate enough to attempt an escape.

"Don't ye try to come none o' yer dug-gun foolishin', critter!" the black-hood growled by way of warning, hand on pistol-butt as he stood at a safe distance, his sturdy legs widely braced. "I hain't that sort o' hairpin, ye want to know! An' when I hev to bite, a mouthful comes out in a lump—she does, now!"

"That's all right, Johnny—your name is Johnny, isn't it?"

"Never you mind ef she is or she isn't, now! Fer one thing, 'tain't Dennis, nur yit Mud!"

"It ought to be honey, to match your natural sweetness of disposition, pardner! But that's twitting on facts, and I'll switch off. I say, mate, ever flip the papers, for pure fun?"

"Not 'long o' sech a chief as you be, I don't," his gruff tones softening enough for Slocum to feel sure that black hood covered a grin. "You ketched onto what the boss said, afore he pulled out? Waal, them's my orders, an' that's what I'm playin'; no less!"

Steele Slocum lay back on his pallet with a faint sigh as of dejection. To all seeming he was rebuffed beyond rallying, but the outlaw still stood on his guard, warily watching his prisoner. Evidently he knew something of the man he was held responsible for, and deemed it wisest not to take any extra chances.

Though Silky Steele lay so quietly, his lids closed, his limbs inert, and his whole seeming that of one who has no thought of making trouble, his brain was busily at work, and he was never more dangerous than in that quiescent attitude.

He never once doubted the truth of what had been told him; the blonde-bearded mask was indeed the notorious road-agent, Major Nightmare, chief of the "Bad Dreams," whose bold exploits had kept the region round about Camp Climax in a state of uneasiness for more than a year past.

They had struck many a heavy blow in their time, and more than one ugly red blotch stained their record, though they shed blood only when armed resistance was shown them.

All this helped convince him that the major was not talking at random when he declared that bad luck attended the sport from Camp Climax; but what could he do?

Alone, unarmed, sore from crown to sole, the natural result of his roping and after-ride.

"It seemed a thousand, but I reckon there must have been at least a score imps in the bunch," he mused, casting his mind back to that reckless raid. "Did they all come here with me? Are they near at hand? Would they hear the row, if I—"

"Look hyar, you sport!" gruffly called out his guard just at that juncture, and giving a start, like one rudely roused from a doze, Slocum lifted his head to ejaculate:

"Eh? Did you— Hello, Johnny!" rising to a sitting posture and forcing a mighty yawn. "You, is it?"

"Bet yer sweet life it's me!"

"Well, what's biting you? You won't play, you won't chin, but you will persist in making yourself an infernal nuisance! Go shake yourself, Johnny, and come back to-morrow mornin' at breakfast-time!"

"That's all right, sport; but I hain't swallerin' of it all so easy. I know ye, like a—"

"Then you number one gentleman among your acquaintances, Johnny. Sorry I can't return the compliment in your case, but—give me truth, or give me pie!"

"I'm givin' ye straight goods, an' don't ye trip over it, sport!" his guard gruffly interposed, drawing and leveling a huge revolver as he added: "Sling up them dukes o' yours, sport!"

"Oh, come off the roost, Johnny!"

"Your cabeza 'll come off ef you don't hyste! Put 'em up, I'm tellin' ye, critter, fer the last axin'."

"Why, I really believe you mean it! All right, Johnny; anything to keep peace in the family," coolly said the sport, elevating his hands as ordered. "If you really knew me, though, you wouldn't—"

"It's jest beca'se I do know ye, Silky Steele, that I'm doin' of it as I be," came the retort, with a grim chuckle. "You ketched what the boss said: I'm held 'sponsible fer the safe keepin' of ye, an' when the boss talks, he mostly says somethin', d'ye mind, now?"

"He told you to treat me white, didn't he?"

"That's what I'm gwine to do; keep them dukes up, or I'll splatter ye all over red!"

Silky Steele put on a deeply-injured expression, but sat motionless, with his hands lifted and palm to palm, watching the burly knave as he fumbled in a pocket with one hand, bringing forth a coil of strong cord, in which he formed a noose as he stepped forward.

"I won't do ye hurt ef ye don't try to kick over the dasher, pard," said the guard, slipping his pistol back into its holster to give himself the use of both hands. "But ef you try to—"

That was all! For, with a swift, sure grip, Silky Steele caught him by the throat with both hands, flinging himself backward and hurling the outlaw squarely over his head, to strike the rock floor with stunning violence.

Swift as thought the Stay-in Sport was upon his prey, gripping his throat fiercely until assured the fellow was past lifting his voice in an alarm, then hastily tearing that black hood from his head, to utter a low ejaculation as he scanned the empurpled face thus laid bare.

"Ben Jeeters! I could almost have sworn as much, from voice and legs, but— It's taking, first!"

A real or fancied sound coming from some undetermined point drew forth that low, savage ejaculation, and tearing the pistols from the belt of the senseless guard, Silky Steele turned at bay, death burning in his eyes even as death lurked at his finger-ends.

But nothing of moment followed that alarm, and satisfied that, let the sound be what it might, none of his captors had as yet taken the alarm, Slocum turned once more to the unconscious outlaw.

"Ugh!" with a slight shiver as he glanced over that soiled, coarse suit of clothes, then cast a glance over his own barely half-clad person. "I hate to put 'em on, but needs must when the devil and all his imps are to be cheated! So—come out o' that, Ben Jeeters!"

It was but the work of a few moments to strip the guard of his outer garments—which left him pretty much in the state of Adam before the fall, by the way! And another minute saw the dandified sport hardly recognizable in his new rig-out; coarse, heavy boots, flannel shirt, short coat, and battered felt hat which had been covered by that black cowl.

Buckling the well-supplied belt of arms about his waist, Silky Steele only paused long enough to bind and gag Ben Jeeters, then stole on tip-toe through the rock-chamber, taking the first opening which presented itself to view.

Pausing when just beyond the circle of light cast forth by the candles, Slocum pulled the black hood over his head, letting its full folds rest on his broad shoulders.

"It smells a bit too Jeetery for comfort," he grimly mused, "but beggars mustn't be choosers, and if I'm not a beggar, I'm still worse off, for I'm the ass between two bundles of hay!"

Before him lay two passages, each one dimly revealed for a few feet by a candle stuck upon a point of rock. Beyond this, there was nothing to tell him which way led to safety, or to the outer world, which amounted to pretty much the same thing in his estimation.

Instinctively his right hand sought his cherished mascot, only to fall away from his plastered chin with a low, disgusted curse. Just then the superstitious gambler felt that death by torture would be by far too light a punishment for the man who had shorn his chin!

Not daring to linger longer, Silky Steele plunged into the right-hand passage, stretching his hands out to guard his head in case the darkness should conceal a sudden turn or other obstructions. It was groping in the dark in a double sense, but his only show for life or liberty seemed to lie in prompt action, and he pressed on, all the more rapidly as his eyes seemed to grow accustomed in a slight degree to the surrounding gloom.

He had not groped very far before he caught sight of a dim light ahead, and for one second his heart leaped high, only to sink again, as he recognized a candle-glimmer instead of a ray of outer light.

The candle marked a point where the tunnel branched abruptly into three distinct passages, two of them trending almost at right angles with the course he had so far followed. That decided him on keeping straight on, but before he could do so, the shrill, piercing scream of a woman's voice came floating through the dark to his ears, almost immediately followed by the rapid rattle of a revolver working swiftly!

"The Greaser gal!" snarlingly snapped the Stay-in Sport, jumping at the right solution as by instinct. "Now, legs, do your duty!"

He took but a single leap, when, coming from the very passage into which he was heading, hoarse shouts and a single shot warned him that the alarm had been taken, and danger lay ahead!

Still other cries and other shots awoke the echoes, and without knowing for certain that some of them did not come from that dark passage, Steele Slocum turned to the left and made his way through the dense gloom as rapidly as he dared, pistols drawn and nerves set for a fight to the death in case of opposition.

For several hundred yards he pressed on, paying no attention to the outcry behind him, only trying to decide for a surety if any cries were coming from his front. Owing to the confined echoes, this was anything but an easy task, and even his keen wits were kept in doubt.

That he was being chased, could not long be doubted. It might be that his direction of flight was only guessed at, but that armed foes were pressing along that very passage, rapidly gaining upon him, Silky Steele could no longer doubt.

He quickened his pace, though he knew any step might cast him down to death or broken limbs; but the end came only too soon!

A deep, hoarse shout came rolling past him

from the rear, and after a brief pause, was answered back from in front!

"Hemmed in, by glory!" he mentally decided, stopping short as one outstretched hand struck against a rough rock. "It's fight, I reckon, unless—*Can I dodge 'em?*"

It seemed a forlorn hope, but still it was a chance, and Silky Steele at once acted on the idea. Replacing his pistol for the moment, he groped through the dark, climbing up the broken rocks which seemed to form that side of the passage, feeling for a nook or crevice in which he might possibly lie hidden until his enemies had passed far enough by to permit his giving them a chase along the back track.

Already he could catch sight of a dim, indistinct light coming in that direction, from the course he had been forced to elect, and his strong teeth clicked sharply against each other as he recognized the truth: the Bad Dreams were searching for him with lights!

"All right! If I'm found, all who come won't go back on their own feet! I'm slow to come, but I'm a stayer when I get in!"

Fearing to feel further for a covert, lest his heavy boots make sound enough to betray his scheme, Silky Steele crouched low down in a recess among the cracked rocks, each hand gripping a revolver, his mind made up to kill as he was killed; for he would never be taken back a living prize!

Forward pressed the outlaws, each man gripping a lighted candle in one hand, pistol in the other, flashing the lights from side to side in quest of the fugitive. So much Silky Steele made out, as well as the fact that, of them all, not a Bad Dream wore the black hoods donned by the gang while playing road-agents.

"So much the worse for me! *It means death if caught!*" flashed through the Stay-in Sport's mind, as he sunk lower in his covert, grimly awaiting the end.

CHAPTER VII.

THE JUDGE ASKS PAY FOR A LIE.

AS will doubtless be remembered, a certain Judge Aaron Ramsey played a prominent if brief part in rescuing the man and woman toward whom suspicion seemed to point as the slayers of poor Sandy McIntosh.

The judge expressed no thanks when Steele Slocum so promptly backed him up in those efforts, but almost before that disconcerted crowd was fairly left behind them, the happy-go-lucky gambler began to suspect that his assistance was rather less than welcome, so far as Aaron himself was concerned.

Up to that moment Silky Steele had been actuated by motives of humanity, pure and simple. He knew from past experience what such ugly hints are pretty sure to end in, unless timely diversions come to carry off a portion of the dangerous electricity. And, after having so flatly bluffed Briggs Oliphant, he could do no less than play the hand out, let the accused be guilty or innocent.

No man living could better appreciate the risks he was running in taking such a heavy contract, and with every wit on the keen alert, the cool gambler saw "Big Elephant" shift position just in time to keep his vicious mates from actually lynching Peter Bell and Injun Molly.

A faint smile passed his lips then, just as it did later, when Judge Aaron Ramsey flung forth his first hint that Slocum could serve them all better by keeping one eye on the crowd and the other "skinned" for the actual murderer.

"Of course I'll be there to back you up, if it should come to anything like a ruction, Mr. Slocum," he added, seeming to take that departure as a matter of course. "But my first duty is to—*Eh?*"

"I'll help you carry it out, judge," briskly chipped in the gambler. "I would be a pity to play both ends against the middle, yet catch a double fall, now wouldn't it?"

"I don't—What do you mean?"

"And so, being as I'm pretty nigh as much at home with the pencil as with the papers, if the boys should come with a rush and a noose, you'd stand less chance of losing the secret together with its rightful owners; *sabe*, my friend?"

It was an impudent insinuation, and Silky Steele would never have been so impolitic as to cast it forth if Judge Ramsey had not so plainly betrayed his wish to shake off the sport.

"I presume you know what you're driving at, sir, but blest if I can even give a guess that way," coldly retorted Ramsey, hurrying forward, his fingers tightening upon Peter Bell's arm.

Slocum made no attempt to clear away that mist, partly because he did not deem it necessary, partly because that rapid pace was bringing them very near that quarter of the town in which Judge Ramsey's office was located.

Silky Steele was correct in setting that office down as their present destination, but if he was counting on being offered a share in that rather dingy refuge, he met with disappointment; for, after hastening the two almost

friendly creatures across the threshold, Aaron Ramsey locked the door behind them, himself remaining on the outside with the gambler.

"They'll be safe in yonder for the present, I reckon," he said, one hand on Slocum's arm, leading him beyond earshot of the building before adding, in colder, sterner tones: "Now, sir, will you please explain your words of a few moments since?"

"About the bonanza, you mean? Well, what's the matter with calling it all a joke, judge?" came the cool, yet placable response.

"Joke goes, Silky, though I must say it came in monstrous bad taste, under the circumstances. Still, you and I can't afford to quarrel over a slip of the tongue. Now—which way are you going?"

"Out of your way, man, dear, of course!"

Without pausing for a retort, Silky Steele moved lightly away, not once casting a backward glance so long as Judge Ramsey could keep trace of his movements. For watch him the judge did, a dark scowl corrugating his brows and lending a wicked gloom to his dark eyes.

"Does he *know*, or merely suspect? If he knows, how much? If any part at all, it's just that portion too much! Look out, Silky, old sport!"

Pausing at the locked door to send a reassuring sentence through the key-hole, Judge Ramsey passed on to spend perhaps half an hour in satisfying himself how matters were working in Camp Climax. Then, making sure Silky Steele was not on the lookout, he returned to his office, and entering, locked the door quickly behind him.

That interval had not been long enough to greatly tranquilize poor Peter Bell, whose wits, reputedly cracked, seemed all tangled up by what had transpired that morning in town.

"They hain't comin'! We never done it, boss! You won't let 'em lynch us—say you won't let 'em lynch us, judge!" quavered the cowering wretch, half-hidden behind Injun Molly, whose dark, lustrous eyes were trying to read what lay back of that grave mask.

Aaron Ramsey was in no great haste to lend that assurance, and while he is waiting, a few words by way of explanation will not come amiss.

Old Peter Bell—"Cracked Bell" he was fully as often termed by those who had occasion to speak of or to him—had only during the past year or so grown of particular consequence to other inhabitants of that mountainous section; and only then because of a rumor gaining currency that the half-witted vagabond had "struck it rich" after some fashion.

If not, where did he get his native gold-dust and virgin nuggets?

Although his purchases were never heavy, and rarely more extensive than himself could pack on his stooped shoulders, for a year past Peter Bell had been paying for everything with unminted gold, although that was a portion of the silver tract.

From this fact had sprung the story of a marvelously rich bonanza to which Peter and his squaw, Injun Molly, held the secret, and as often as they ventured into Camp Climax to replenish their "grub" or to make other purchases, just so often were efforts made to trail them back to that same bonanza by covetous citizens.

Up to date naught but disappointment had repaid those efforts, for just as often Peter and Molly would disappear from sight and sound, leaving no trail behind them which eye or even nose could lift.

Peter Bell seemed bowed down by something more than weight of years, though a keen judge might have placed those at the three-score limit; too old for such a young squaw as Molly, more than one Camp Climaxite had bluntly declared. And yet, barring her supple figure and her darkly lustrous eyes, Injun Molly might have passed for almost any age between twenty and fifty.

Aaron Ramsey was watching her, rather than her husband, during that ominous pause; yet it was hardly so much the woman he saw, as the yellow treasure which his imagination pictured in the background.

Injun Molly showed no signs of fear for herself, just then. She had thoughts and fears only for Peter Bell, on whose bent head one dusky hand now gently stole with soothing touch.

"Dat so—*nebber* do! Tek swear—*big* swear!"

"So did I, but I swore to a lie—worse luck me!" said Ramsey, with a long breath that fell just short of being a sigh. "I had to lie, or see you both go up a tree in a hurry!"

"We never done it, boss! Never done it—never—"

"I don't say you did, Peter. I hope you didn't do it, but—"

"Great Spirit hear—*nebber* shoot dat man!" earnestly spoke up Injun Molly, seeming to lose much of her traditional taciturnity, now that deadly peril menaced the man who called her his squaw.

"That's all right, Molly. I'm more than ready to believe you. I proved as much when I

faced all that gang down with a lie—a flat, bald-headed lie, no less! You know that, Peter Bell?"

"I'm mighty grateful, boss—turrible grateful! But—we never harmed *yen*' pore critter! Why should we? He was our friend! I reckon Sandy was about the onliest friend we hed in all these parts!"

"Haven't I stood your friend, Peter?" in tones of deepest reproach. "Didn't I face yon gang and swear to a lie just on your account? I swore that you spent the night under my roof, and never left it until after sunrise! *That* was a lie, and you know it, Peter!"

"'Twon't be laid up ag'in' ye, boss—no it won't, now! Fer ef you hedn't 'a' stuck up fer us—"

"You'd have tasted hemp in bitter black earnest, Peter! It gives me the cold shivers, even now, just to think! For—they make a monstrous bad crowd, Peter, once they get their backs up! And—let 'em once drop to the lie I told—they'd lynch me out of hand for this bit of work! You'd ought to know so much, Peter?"

Bell only groaned, hiding his face in his hands. Injun Molly drew closer to him, further from the judge. Her dark eyes caught a glow of mingled doubt and aversion as they strove to read that flushed face aright.

"And so—if I hadn't chipped in, Peter, that bonanza of yours wouldn't have saved you! It's a rich one, isn't it, Peter?"

"Dat lie—all lie!" sharply interposed Injun Molly.

As though this was a needed cue, Peter Bell braced up, stoutly declaring that he had made no such discovery; but Aaron Ramsey would not have it that way, and now the ice was fairly broken, he stubbornly pressed the point he had resolved to make.

"The fellow was killed with an arrow, and that arrow bears the private mark of Molly, here," he said, among other things. "So far I've saved your lives, and I'm the only man living who can get you safely out of this ugly scrape. Shall I do it? Shall I stick to my lie, or shall I confess the truth and turn you over to the citizens for trial?"

"Don't—it'd be murder, boss!" groaned Bell, dejectedly.

"It'll be worse than murder for me if my trick is smoked by the boys," rudely interposed the judge, his avarice growing with the food it fed upon. "Tell me your secret! Give me a fair share in your bonanza, and I'll stand to your back until this storm blows over. Why, man, even then you'll be the gainer, without counting in your two lives, for I'll develop the strike until it'll make us all rich beyond counting!"

In like manner Judge Ramsey pursued his point, now giving thinly-veiled threats, then stooping to coaxings, interspersed with arguments such as none save a money-lover could conjure up; but the result was still the same.

"It's a mistake, boss, all a mistake! Ef I knowed any sech, I'd jump at the offer, but—it's all a mistake!" mumbled Cracked Bell.

Time passed unnoted in that one-sided argument, and Judge Ramsey was still trying to carry his point when the advent of Major Nightmare's Bad Dreams cast Camp Climax into confusion.

The rapid crackling of firearms, blending with wild yells and the rumbling pounding of iron-shod hoofs along the rocky street, gave one and all of that trio a great start, for the same fear occurred to all.

"Don't let 'em, boss!" huskily gasped Cracked Bell, cowering still lower, while Injun Molly, bow in hand, stood before him, her eyes ablaze with resolution.

"Lay low, and keep quiet!" hastily spoke the speculator, as he turned toward the front door. "I'll give 'em another bluff, if you'll promise to share your secret with me! I'll save you if—Lay low, and never let out a whimper until you hear me call out my own name!"

While speaking, Ramsey was unfastening the door, and slipping outside, he turned the key in its wards before rushing toward the scene of excitement.

To do him simple justice, he really believed all that racket was raised by the mob in their passion for vengeance on the real or supposed slayer of poor Sandy McIntosh. He felt that he was risking his own life in trying to shield Injun Molly from that vengeance, but he never hesitated for an instant in his resolution.

The Bad Dreams fled from town in a direction contrary to that in which Judge Ramsey had escorted the suspects, hence it took a little longer for him to discover the very natural error into which he had fallen. And then, partly through a wish to learn the full truth of that double abduction, and partly to avoid awakening suspicion by over-haste in breaking away from that excited crowd, many precious minutes were cut to waste, during which events were taking place which seriously endangered his hopes of winning sudden riches.

For, after shaking off the crowd, and cautiously giving the signal named, Judge Ramsey unlocked and slipped inside his little office, only to find it deserted by all save himself!

At first he could not believe his own eyes, but it was only too true; Peter Bell and Injun Molly had vanished, leaving no clew behind!

CHAPTER VIII.

SILKY STEELE TAKES LONG CHANCES.

It was a critical moment, and fully realizing as much, the Stay-in Sport crouched low in his covert, stilling his breath the better to use his ears, knowing that should he expose even a portion of his person to those flashing lights, he could hardly hope to escape discovery.

And that as he had long since told himself, could hardly be less than certain death!

Nearer drew the outlaws, until their candles illumined the very rock back of which Silky Steele was crouching, and even his stout heart beat a bit more rapidly as the armed knaves came to a pause just then and there, a coarse voice ringing forth:

"Spot him, mates! Shoot at sight, an' drive center every crack!"

"Reckon he come this way?"

"Ain't it mighty nigh sure he did? Ef he'd tuck t'other lane, the boys'd 'a' holed him afore this. An' he couldn't 'a' passed out the front way, could he?"

"Don't 'pear so, but—"

"Hunt, not chaw wind, dug-gun ye all!" with a vicious snarl; then lifting his voice in a peculiar call, which rolled along that irregular passage in a volume of sound. "All ears open, now!"

A brief pause, then a similar sound came sweeping back, and the tall outlaw gave a grim growl before saying:

"Don't that tell ye? He never slipped past the guards that way, so we must hev him in atwixt us! On, an' smoke the critter out!"

"Ef he hain't hunkered down 'mongst some o' the rocks we've passed by a'ready, though!"

"Ef so, it's jest a bit longer play, fer one gang or t'other'll down him when he tries to sneak out. You know that, dug-gun ye, Bob!"

The searchers passed on, never once suspecting the truth, though one and all had flashed their candles over the very rock back of which the Stay-in Sport had crowded his person. Fortunately for him the gray lines blended together so neatly that such a covert was not suspected.

He had drank in every word uttered in front of his refuge, and as the search party pressed on, he swiftly ran those sentences over in his mind. Precious little comfort was to be extracted therefrom!

"It's blocked behind, and barred in front! If they say I can't slip out that way, doubtless they know what they're talking about. Then—there's an opening on ahead! Full of toughs, eager to shoot, but can't I bore my bigness through 'em, with a surprise in my favor?"

Only a thoroughly cool, wholly fearless man would even have thought of such a thing, but Silky Steele had won more than one apparently hopeless game by desperate bluffing in his time, and when nothing less would suffice, he was ever ready to take long chances.

Guided by his keen sense of hearing, he waited until the last of that search-party had passed beyond his place of hiding, then stole a guarded glance over the edge of the rock which had stood him in such good stead.

He saw that, though searching both sides of the passage with their lights, the outlaws cast no glances behind them, at least while his brief inspection lasted. And when gloom settled all about him, Slocum climbed down from the rocks, tiptoeing along in the rear of the enemy, hand on pistol-butt, ready to draw and make a swift, deadly fight for life in case of discovery.

To decide, was to act, with Steel Slocum. Once determined to risk his chances on dogging that search party, the Stay-in Sport never hesitated, never cast a thought backward. His way was ahead, and he took it.

Not rashly, leaving the main fact out of the question. He knew that he could see further ahead than the light-bearers could see back, all other things being even; but he was too cool-brained to trust anything to chance which might be regulated better.

Hence it was that, instead of pressing the enemy closely, Silky Steel contented himself with an occasional glimpse of the rearmost candle, feeling his way as he advanced with hand and foot.

Common prudence dictated this action, yet it might have fared better with Slocum had he ignored that same prudence, and kept nearer to those search-lights.

For, feeling that where others had passed, so might he in safety, and urged to more haste by abruptly losing sight of those lights, Silky Steele quickened his pace, covering a few rods with free strides instead of feeling the way by shuffling his heavily-shod feet along the uneven bottom of that passage. And so, without warning, the bottom seemed to drop out of the tunnel, and he pitched headlong into a pit-hole of some description!

Almost any man would have uttered a cry of fear at finding himself falling, to meet what might easily prove his death, but not so the Stay-in Sport. His teeth clinched so firmly that they seemed to splinter with the heavy

shock which ensued; for Slocum struck on his head and shoulders with stunning force!

For a few seconds he lay as he had fallen, half-stunned, yet too wise to struggle before he had fully rallied his wits, lest he cast himself into still greater peril. For all he knew to the contrary, he might be lying precariously poised on the very brink of a relatively bottomless abyss, down which the slightest movement might precipitate him.

Even as he lay thus, Slocum reasoned that his fall could not have been very great, else he would not have been able to rally so quickly. And then, using his hands alone at first, he groped around in that utter darkness, trying to make out his chances or escape with life on a limb.

In obedience to a very natural impulse, he felt for a match, but held his hand before striking it. Might not even that faint flicker bring more peril than aid? Might it not be discovered by unfriendly eyes?

That reflection was quite sufficient, and the Stay-in Sport carefully replaced the splinter of pine, to trust to his sense of touch alone.

That quickly told him he was lying on a comparatively level rock, though close at hand a cracked, jagged wall rose above his head. Yet, as he stood up to lift his hands over the face of that wall, his heart sunk lower, for he doubted if he could scale it without rope or human assistance.

All of this consumed time, though Slocum had only examined that portion of his new quarters close to where he had struck in falling, and before he could pursue his investigations further, he caught the sound of human voices, and after listening a brief space, felt nearly certain men with lights were coming that way!

He felt tolerably certain they were all or a portion of the road-agents whom he had been dogging in their quest, but whether or no that was the case, he knew he had no right to look for any but deadly enemies in that subterranean retreat.

"Cornered, may be, but I've got my teeth with me!" he grimly reflected, making sure his confiscated revolvers were still in place and uninjured by that awkward tumble.

Still, he would not fight unless forced, and with a dim hope of escaping discovery, even now, he crowded back under a projecting ledge of rock, pulling the black hood over his face lest its pallor betray him by reflecting those approaching lights.

He could see, through the eye-holes, and as the light gradually grew brighter, he began to realize how he had come to trap himself; for, as he gazed in breathless suspense, he saw the road-agents, nearly a dozen in number, pass close to the left-hand wall, along a narrow but safe ledge of rock, nearly overhanging the shallow pit into which he had tumbled!

The road-agents filed along that ledge, not one of their number deigning to cast so much as a passing glance into that pit. Possibly they had examined it while first passing in search, but the lights they carried stood Steele Slocum in right good stead, just then!

Directly opposite where he lay, his rusty garments blending with the neutral-hued rocks, he took note of a shelving, irregular wall of rock, up which he felt sure he could climb, even in the dark, and thus gain the passage through which his enemies had just come!

Only waiting until the search-party passed out of hearing, Silky Steele silently crept across that brief space, climbing up the rocks which formed that wall, but stopping short with a smothered ejaculation when only a few feet above the level to which he had fallen.

"A draught! Where does it come from?" he asked himself, then paused to consider how much or how little that discovery might mean to him.

Even though the search-party had failed to discover him, would they leave the opening, which everything went to prove must lie in that direction, wholly unguarded? Not at all likely, after what had been said by one of their number concerning the possibility of their having passed the fugitive by, owing to his hiding in some nook or cranny.

"Guarded, safe enough," mentally decided the gambler, groping his way to where the draught came strongest, then carefully feeling about with his hands. "A hole, for sure! But—whither does it lead? To the passage up yonder, or—Down-grade, by thunder!"

True, this fact might mean nothing, but it was sufficient to decide the immediate course of the fugitive, and cautiously crawling through the narrow opening among the rocks, he guardedly groped his way for a short distance, until his feet struck a comparatively level bottom.

Listening for a few moments without catching a sound to warn him of danger in so acting, Silky Steele struck a match, carefully shielding it with his curved palms until blazing at its best, then flashing the light around and before him; to note the walls and roof of a passage almost precisely like that which he had noted while the search-party were passing by his covert!

"It's the same one, I reckon!" he muttered,

with an echo of disappointment as the match expired. "I hoped I'd stumbled into another thoroughfare, but— Well, mog along, Josey!"

After all, he was no worse off than before, and might fare better than if he had actually stumbled into another tunnel, for that might end in a blind pocket, while he knew the first one had an outlet. The words caught while lying in hiding among the rocks proved so much, at least.

While making as much haste as he deemed prudent, bearing in mind his recent accident, Silky Steele cautiously tested each foot of the flooring before trusting his weight upon it, at brief intervals striking a match for a brief survey of his surroundings.

After a time he used those frail torches only when an obstacle rendered it necessary, for he felt confident that the end of the tunnel must now be near at hand, and the slightest noise or light might lay him open to discovery and to death; for discovery meant just that!

"I'll never be taken back alive, that's sworn to!" he mentally said.

In his caution, Silky Steele removed his heavy boots, slinging them to his back, out of the way, then crept forward in his socks, keenly on the alert, watching for the earliest glimmer of light by which he might locate the guarded opening.

It came at last, none the less grateful because so long delayed, or because he felt that its discovery meant for him a life and death fight against unknown odds. Though a full score armed knaves barred the way, he vowed to win at least one full breath of free air.

Inch by inch he crawled forward, pistols in hand ready for use. He believed that he could see before being seen, since his back was toward utter darkness, while the guards were located precisely contrary.

If—surely he ought to have seen or heard some signs, ere this?

Scarce two-score feet of rock bottom lay between himself and that narrow, crack-like opening, yet neither sight nor sound rewarded his senses! And then—

"Was it another passage, after all?"

That sudden hope sent hot and cold waves chasing each other up and down his back, but even then the Stay-in Sport did not take anything for granted, creeping slowly forward, making sure no possible ambushade could lie on either hand.

But he fairly won that opening without anything transpiring to dissipate that engendering hope; surely he had stumbled into a new and unknown passage! For, if known to them, would not the road-agents have searched and guarded it?

So arguing, Silky Steele crept partly through the opening, flashing swift, keen looks around—to step forth as he saw nothing alarming—only to fling forward his pistol-hand with a sharp challenge as he both saw and sighted something!

"Halt, there! Show cause, or I'll call your last turn!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE STAY-IN SPORT FINDS COMPANY.

ONLY a man who was both looking for and expecting an enemy could have seen proof of such in those apparent trifles: a faint sound as of a slipping heel on the rock, a gleam of rusty brown contrasting with the green of yonder bushes.

Silky Steele acted all the more swiftly because he knew he had lacked wise deliberation just previous; instead of taking his new belief for granted, he ought to have watched and waited until convinced by the best of proofs that he was right: that this was indeed the unguarded mouth of an unknown passage through that frowning range.

It was too late for retreat now, if he had blundered into an ambushade, and only marveling that he had been given time sufficient to even draw a weapon, he flung his pistol-hand forward and covered yonder clump of shrubbery.

But not to shoot!

His challenge was still warm upon his lips when the foliage was parted to give passage to a human figure, and a nervous twitch sent the muzzle of his pistol up and back as he found it covering a woman!

"Injun Molly!"

She it was, standing at bay, her lithe figure braced as she bent her long bow until the barbed arrow-head nearly touched the sinew-wrapped grip, her dark eyes flashing sternly as she confronted the man who dared bar their way. *Theirs*, for just behind the Indian woman showed the bearded face and frightened eyes of Peter Bell.

"You shoot, me kill!"

"I'm a friend, Molly, so don't waste an arrow," quickly said the gambler, slipping his pistol back to place, then holding up his empty hands. "You'd ought to know that, Peter Bell, for I did what I could to save your necks from the rope, back at Camp Clinex!"

"Ef I don't—kin it be—but he toted a sort o' weenty baird onto the chin o' him, an' then—"

"While now I'm like Samsen, shorn of my mascot! Worse, too!" with a short, angry

sound which could scarcely be termed a laugh, yet what was intended for such. "He only lost his strength, but I've lost my luck!"

"We hain't found it, boss!" hastily spluttered the mountain vagabond. "Deed an' double deed we never didn't, now!"

Injun Molly, who had been keenly scanning face and figure of the man who had so unexpectedly barred their further passage along that none too wide shelf, now lowered her shaft, seemingly recognizing a friend in that supposed enemy.

She turned her face toward Cracked Bell, speaking rapidly in what might have been her native tongue for all Steele Slocum could say, then turned toward him with a quiet gesture, saying:

"Dat so, dat good. Some time pay back, if can. Now—heap hurry, we go—dat way!"

Her quick gestures spoke even more clearly than her tongue, and understanding that she asked free passage along the ledge, Slocum instinctively stepped back, only to remember as Peter Bell drew clear of the bushes which had hindered an earlier recognition.

"I say, old fellow, you're not one of those Bad Dreams, are you? Not one of the road-agents, I mean?"

"Does my rig-out look so mighty much that-a-way?" retorted Bell, with a half-grin, as he displayed his dilapidation.

"Then I reckon you'd best take to cover with me, until we can see just how the cards are running."

A grip on an arm carried Peter along with Slocum as the gambler took cover in the little patch of shrubbery, and Injun Molly followed after, though with a troubled expression on her painted and tattooed face the while.

It took only a few words to let them know just what manner of peril menaced, and if Silky Steele had fancied for an instant that Peter was allied to that lawless organization, the look of fear and hatred which grew in his face as he listened now, banished all lingering doubt on that point.

"I couldn't let you run blindly into their grip, Peter, of course," the Stay-in Sport finished by saying. "And yet, maybe I'm serving you an even uglier trick; those devils are hunting me hard, and hunting me to take or to kill! If they find you in my company—"

"Let 'em find; I reckon us two kin fight 'em!" valiantly spoke up the mountain vagabond, fumbling with his rusty yet serviceable rifle.

"Two? you mean three, Peter!"

"Eh! Oh! But she's on'y jest a squaw, an' so don't count."

"That slur would come with a better grace from other lips, old man," coldly retorted the gambler, with a swift glance toward the averted face of Injun Molly. "Only a squaw though you say, she chipped equal to a man, just back, and saved your last stake. I had you lined, and was about pulling in your chips when she—only a squaw!"

"Jes' so; on'y a squaw," mumbled Peter, his frowzy pow nodding like that of a mandarin duck in a thunder-shower. "Good squaw, mebbe, as sech critters run, but—Waal, things will grow old, an' shakly, an' bothersome, an'—Eh?"

Slocum's first impulse was to cuff the ears of the vagabond who so shamelessly depreciated what had so recently proven his shield, but then the truth flashed upon his keen wits, and he laughed, instead.

Peter Bell was trying to guard against a possible interest in his squaw, by making her out unworthy a second examination. That, or he was already growing jealous of his new friend, whose eyes were roving too frequently in that direction.

Injun Molly herself seemed ill at ease beneath that inspection, though Slocum had tried to veil his interest as much as might be. She turned her face aside so that it was hidden from those keen gray eyes, and she even moved away from Peter, until a bush or two grew between them; facts simple enough in themselves, but which led to a discovery on her part which drew a low, agitated note of warning from her lips.

"Lay low, man!" hissed the Stay-in Sport, pressing Bell back under cover from which he was rashly moving in his eagerness to see what was menacing. "It's the gang, and they're searching for me, I reckon; but if they sight you, they'll call your chips to a moral!"

"Two—dat all," whispered Injun Molly.

"With the rest of the deck not far away, I'm staking, though," grimly warned the gambler, silently shifting his position until he could keep watch on their movements.

His first belief had been that the road-agents had in some manner become convinced of his escape from that curious underground burrow, and that they were scattered over the rocky range, searching for him. But as he watched the leisurely, careless movements of those two men, he began to doubt; surely they were not expecting to encounter a desperate and fully-armed fugitive?

Possibly they were part of the guard spoken of by the search-party, and who were changing

their location in order to cover yet another mode of exit from that den.

"They're not searching for us, anyway," at length decided the gambler, settling back in his covert with an air of relief. "We'll let 'em go their own way, and give 'em law enough to take them out of our game, if that may be. Now—while waiting, Peter, how did you leave matters in general at the camp?"

"You don't b'lieve we done that—that thing?" hesitatingly asked Bell, something of the old timidity returning to face and voice.

"I know you didn't," promptly declared the Stay-in Sport. "If I had reckoned so, I'd have been among the first to cry aloud for justice, instead of chipping in on your side. Can't you see so much, Peter?"

"I kin, an' I'm thankin' ye fer it, sir, more times over than one pore, trembly tongue kin tell," his right hand going out to clasp that of the gambler. "God knows we need sech fri'nds, an' when—"

"Dat man-fox—him say be friend, too!" murmured Injun Molly, in a significant aside, yet amply loud enough for both men to take in her full meaning.

Instead of showing resentment, Slocum laughed softly, then spoke:

"Meaning Judge Aaron, of course, Peter? Yes, I can hear him pouring just such taify into the ears o' ye both! None like him! None so true, so honest, so disinterested as he! And yet—dollars to cents, Peter, old Aaron offered to take a share in your secret bonanza, just to make his friendship more binding!"

"I hain't—it's all a mistake, sir!" mumbled the mountain vagabond, shifting uneasily, his eyes drooping before that clear gaze. "I never—we didn't—"

"I'm not asking or caring whether you did or no, Peter, and secret it remains, for all of me," came the quick, half-contemptuous retort. "But I am a bit curious to learn just how you gave the judge the slip, for I hardly believe he'd let you go toll-free!"

"Nur he wouldn't, durn him fer a blood-sucker!" snarled Bell, bristling up with a plainer display of manhood than he had shown at any moment since the death of poor Sandy McIntosh was brought to light.

He was on the point of speaking still plainer, when Injun Molly touched his arm. She meant it as a secret warning, but the keen eyes of the gambler were on the alert, and he read that signal aright.

Somehow it stung him to the quick, and rising to his feet, he coldly but earnestly spoke:

"That's all right, Molly, and you, Peter Bell. I'm seeking no man's confidence. I ask no man to trust me against his will. I mean you both well, just as I would any other persons whom I found in peril which instinct told me they had done nothing to merit. I chipped, then, as I would chip again, but that danger is past, and with it goes all memory of the service I may have rendered you then."

"Now, a last word, Peter: from your looks, I believe you really need, even as you want, a friend and backer. If you care to trust me, of your own free will, well and good. I'll not harm, if I can't serve you. But I'll take no half-way friendship. Rather than that—good-by!"

"I don't—I never—"

"That's all right, Peter. The world is before us both, and these hills are vast enough to furnish trails for two. Take your way, and I'll take mine. Only—keep your eyes peeled for Bad Dreams!"

With a curt nod toward Injun Molly, the Stay-in Sport moved away from the bushy covert by which the others had reached that point; but before he had gone a score yards, Peter Bell, followed by the faithful squaw, was close to his heels.

"I didn't mean—she didn't mean like this, pardner!" Bell said, earnestly, as Slocum cast a glance over his shoulder. "Ef you'll show us pore critters fri'ndship we'll be too mighty glad fer any sort o' use! We jest will, now! Fer we need it—need it monstrous 'ad!"

"That's all right, Peter; but don't you decide in too big a hurry," was the rather chilling response. "I'll see you through this bit of risky ground, if I can pull through myself, but we'll let all rest simmer a bit longer. Come—and step easy, man!"

Though the footing was fair enough, that ledge was growing more and more exposed to view of any watchers, for nothing in the shape of bush or vine could find sustenance there; and though, by rounding a point of the hill, they had lost sight of the lone covert where their meeting had taken place, it was by no means so certain that they had passed beyond visual range of those two armed guards of whom a glimpse had been caught.

No other words were spoken by any of the trio, and each one seemed ill at ease as that irregular ledge was followed. There was danger abroad, and it might burst upon them with any passing moment.

Silky Steele led the way, his right hand hovering near his weapons, his keen gaze sweeping here and there, looking for the first sign of trouble. Although it had been mainly his do-

ings, he was by no means satisfied with that addition to his cares. And yet—

He could not refrain from glancing at Injun Molly, from time to time, and even caught himself making opportunities for those looks. She was influencing his brain curiously, and as he was forced to make this inward acknowledgment, his native superstition began to awaken, and his hand lifted to seek his "mascot." Only to drop with an angry gesture, as it met that shorn and patched chin!

Then, without preliminary sound or warning, a huge boulder came plunging down that rocky mountain, seemingly headed direct for the trio.

With a sharp cry of warning, Silky Steele caught Molly, flinging her back and toward the face of the rock, just as that rocky mass struck the ledge only a few score feet above their heads!

CHAPTER X.

COMING TO CLOSE QUARTERS.

THERE was no time for more, and only for a kindly Providence, the imperiled fugitives could hardly have escaped annihilation.

The huge boulder broke off a portion of the ledge above, casting a shower of debris down upon the trio, but then its course was changed, and it shot down in front of them, striking the second ledge with a force that caused the rocky hillside to tremble.

A cloud of dust and rocky particles filled the air, shutting off their view as they cowered there, half stunned, wholly confused for the instant; but Steele Slocum quickly rallied, hoarsely muttering:

"Back, and down, Peter Bell! The devils have sighted us, and bullets will be coming next turn! Back, man, I say!"

He crowded Injun Molly still closer to the face of the wall, drawing a revolver with his free hand as he crouched by her side, peering upward through that veil of dust, looking for the dastardly enemies whose handiwork he felt assured this must be.

Peter Bell crept cowering to his side, yet with sufficient nerve left to look to his repeating-rifle; it had received no material injury, and would stand them in good stead should a charge follow that rocky avalanche.

From the second ledge, the boulder had plunged still further downward, bringing up at the bottom of the canyon with a mighty crash, sending its echoes far and wide; but neither shot nor shout followed after, and as the seconds mounted up to minutes without a sound further to indicate the proximity of road-agents, Slocum began to doubt his first impressions.

"Maybe it's not so bad, after all," he whispered, still keeping a restraining hand on Injun Molly. "Maybe the rock took a tumble on its own hook, but—take no chances, is a mighty good motto, Peter!"

The fugitives lay low and motionless until nearly five minutes passed by, but as no sound came to alarm them further, the Stay-in Sport cautiously crept along the face of the rock-wall, picking his way toward the spot where the boulder had struck their ledge with its full force and weight.

There to make an ugly discovery: the ledge was broken away close to the wall, and their further progress in that direction was effectually barred!

"We kin go back as we come, I reckon," ventured Bell, when Slocum returned with that bit of information.

"We can try," was the dry retort. "We've got to try it, for nothing without wings can pass that shoulder now. But—how far can we go without being set up as targets for those infernalimps! That's the question bothering my brain, just now!"

"Mebbe they don't know nothin'."

"They've got ears, I reckon, and eyes to back 'em up, worse luck! A dead man couldn't have missed hearing that racket, and thoseimps'll be wanting to know how happened it so. And yet—we can't stay here forever!"

Prompt to act when his course was plainly laid out before him, the Stay-in Sport took the lead in retracing their steps, brushing the wall with one shoulder, pistol in hand, and eyes on the keen lookout for possible danger.

More than half the distance had been covered without aught transpiring to confirm those ugly suspicions, but Steele Slocum was not a man to recklessly run risks where nothing was to be gained thereby, and his caution was not laid aside. He did all that a prudent man could do, more for those who were keeping him company than for himself, be it added; but, even, then, the danger broke upon them, unawares.

Just as they rounded a curve in the trail, a shot rung out from the rocks high above that ledge, and as his hat flew off his head, Steele Slocum gave a sharp exclamation, falling forward like one mortally stricken!

A wild yell of exultation followed from above, and Injun Molly, with a shrill cry that sounded fully as despairing as wrathful, sprung forward and over that struggling form, drawing an arrow to its head, then sending a vengeful shaft

whistling through the air, to bury itself in the broad chest of the marksman on the rocks!

At almost the same instant the Stay-in Sport scrambled to his feet, and catching the Indian woman up in his arms, bounded along the ledge, with a hasty call for Peter Bell to follow after them.

Other cries than that of pain came from the rocks above, and fire-arms began to talk in spiteful spurts as the outlaws tried to drop those rapidly-shifting targets. Peter Bell sent back a couple of shots as he ran, but paused not to note their effect, for even he was not too greatly excited to realize that their sole chance for life lay in gaining the cover which lay beyond that exposed stretch of bare rock.

Nor were his steps moderated by the loud, exultant cry which came from the armed knaves above, as they won a fair view of the fugitives.

"It's the Injun squaw, lads! Down the men critters, but ketch *her* livin'. That's big money—"

Peter Bell took a snap-shot at the rascal, and though his lead failed to enter flesh, it struck the rock close enough to send a stinging shower of leaden particles into that hairy face, causing its owner to duck under cover with a volley of furious curses.

Through all, Silky Steele pressed on at full speed, bearing Injun Molly in his arms with as much seeming ease as though she weighed no more than the veriest infant, instead of being a plump, well-formed adult. And then, without hurt other than he had received by that first shot, the Stay-in Sport leaped to cover, dropping his living burden and filling his hands with Ben Jeeters's pistols instead.

"Lively, Peter!" he sung out to the old man, at the same time exposing his own person on the chance of drawing the enemies' fire from the panting vagabond. "Another jump and—Good enough for our side!"

Cracked Bell sunk down by the side of Injun Molly, temporarily winded by his violent efforts, but Slocum, outwardly as cool and collected as even he had been over a card-table, exchanged his pistols for the Winchester, looking for a living target among those rocks.

That was not hard to sight. The outlaws, no doubt fired by avarice in addition to other incentives, were coming in as rapid a charge as natural obstacles would permit, and coolly selecting the foremost man, Silky Steele covered, and sent him his compliments.

With a hoarse yell of mortal agony, the outlaw flung aloft his hands, losing his balance, then pitching heavily forward, striking across a point of rock many feet below, to lie there a limp and hideous object.

Swift as thought Slocum turned his rifle toward another target, but the fellow, awed by the awful fate of his mate, was already ducking behind cover, and the lead only barked his shoulder.

That was all, for the present, and Slocum sent up a taunting laugh, with the characteristic defiance.

"I'm Slocum by name, and slow-to-come by nature! But when I do come, I'm in the game to stay! Call again when you want another deal, my dandy jacks!"

He sprung back to cover, just as a couple of hasty shots were sent from back of the rocks, but neither bullet touched its target; those who sent them were too thoroughly scared for the moment to expose their persons, in order to make sure of their aim.

"Hold 'em level, lads!" cried a shrill voice from further up the mountain-side. "They can't git away onless—Hold 'em level, an' I'll go fetch the boss!"

"Satan thank you for the favor!" grimly muttered Slocum, as he took in the full meaning of that speech. "If you'll only be so accomodating as to show up your elegant shape, just long enough for me—"

His voice died away in his throat as he gripped the Winchester, sweeping the rocks to either side of that hidden force with his keenest glances. If he could only drop the volunteer messenger by a lucky shot, it would be some gain, if only a few extra minutes of grace.

As the minutes passed by without the longed-for sight greeting his eyes, Slocum began to fear the cunning knave had succeeded in stealing away unseen; but he was rightly called the Stay-in Sport, and he maintained his watch with untiring vigilance.

And then his reward came, at last!

It was a long shot for a strange rifle, but Slocum knew the make, and he had tested it to the death of one evil knave. His nerves were firm as steel as he lifted the weapon to his shoulder, estimating the distance and setting the rear sight in one time and one motion. He brought the bead cleanly in line with the messenger's neck, then pulled the trigger, ducking his head swiftly to one side for a glimpse of his target before the blue smoke could spread wide enough to obscure his vision.

The outlaw was in the act of falling forward, and watching for a score seconds without seeing him attempt to rise, the Stay-in Sport gave a low, hard chuckle of self-gratulation.

"Plum' center, or I'll eat my hat—when I get one!"

A yell came from the rocks above, but it was one of derision for a wasted shot, and that, more than all else, gratified the daring marksman.

"They haven't smoked the trick, and I'm hoping they'll not, until too late to send off another message to Major Nightmare," was his explanation to his companions in peril. "Now, we've got to get out of this, if it lays in the wood!"

Those words were easy enough to pronounce, but could it be done?

"I really reckon it can, if you two will obey orders to the very letter," declared Slocum, after a quick but critical survey of their surroundings. "Once over yonder—a short forty yards—without being seen, I believe we can give 'em the clean slip without their even suspecting it until they grow impatient enough to come and look. Will you do as I say, friends?"

"Do dat—fo' you!" quietly but decisively said Injun Molly.

"Good enough! You go first, Peter. Lay low, and keep close to the wall. Don't lift your head for so much as a squint, until you've passed the bluestreak in the rock, yonder. You follow, Molly, and I'll keep those imps under cover close enough, never you fear! Start at my first shot, Peter!"

With a full magazine to back him up, the Stay-in Sport opened fire on the rocks which sheltered the outlaws, sending bullet after bullet into cracks and crevices, seemingly with no other hope or purpose than to chance finding a victim with a glancing bullet.

The ruse was perfectly successful. The outlaws lay low under cover, sending back yells and hoots of derision, while Peter and Molly crept across the danger-line, to be swiftly followed by Silky Steele before the road-agents could fairly realize that the fierce fusillade had come to a natural ending.

All seemed clear sailing, now, their greatest danger lying in the possibility of all that firing reaching the ears of the main force of outlaws, in which case an investigation would surely follow.

"We've got to chance that much," said Slocum, leading the way, on guard all the while. "I'd heap sight rather our heads were turned the other way, but this seems our only chance to jump the game with a life-stake left us. So—steady, and all-eyes-open!"

They gained the lone patch of bushes where their first encounter took place, without aught turning up to alarm or delay their flight; but then Slocum insisted on pressing further in advance.

"I came out of that hole, yonder, and I know there's another one of the same sort no mighty distance away. It was guarded, and it may be now. It may even—but talk's too cheap!"

Refusing to hear any argument, he pressed forward in advance, passing by the crevice through which he had crawled not long before, but which was so unobtrusive that he would hardly have recognized the spot only for nearly falling into the mouth of it as his ankle turned through a loose stone. But he did not go many rods beyond that point!

He caught sight of an armed force—just how numerous he dared not stop to learn—ahead and above him. They could only be enemies, and has ening back, he joined his mates, to hurriedly mutter:

"They're coming! Only show—hide in hole! Quick, both o' ye!"

It seemed a desperate resort, but he had not time to think of a better plan, and standing guard while Injun Molly and Peter Bell crept in through that narrow opening, Silky Steele followed after, laying aside his weapons to hastily but silently plug up the opening with handy stones, leaving only a small loop-hole for sight and shooting, should worst come to worst.

Hardly was this done, before the enemy came to a halt right there!

CHAPTER XI.

MAJOR NIGHTMARE HEARS A STORY.

THE chief of the road-agents was moodily pacing back and forth in the rock-chamber where he had left the Stay-in Sport under watch and ward, only to be recalled by that wild alarm and greeted by word that after some mysterious manner guard and captive had exchanged places.

It was indeed "the Greaser gal" who first made that discovery, just as Steele Slocum surmised, but no time was consumed by asking or offering an explanation of her paying the visit which ended in causing such a universal disturbance.

Major Nightmare was at the main entrance, and his was the pistol which sent back the answering shot by way of instruction: and he was at the head of those whose coming forced the Stay-in Sport to veer so blindly aside from the course he had decided upon at the point where those ways divided.

Straight for the chamber the chieftain sped, reaching it before the unlucky guard had fairly regained his senses, and it was to him that Ben Jeeters gave the first inkling of the manner in which the gambler had turned this, his latest trick.

The outwitted fellow was too wise to try to cover his slip by inventing an excuse, or by stretching the truth too widely. He told a short, plain tale, and probably escaped all the more lightly on that account.

"I knowed him for a slipp'y cuss, boss, an' I didn't 'low to take no long chances. An' so—I sot out to double-hitch his paws, to make dead-sure. He held up like a lamb—dug-gun him! I kep' him kivered with a gun, but afore I knowed it, I didn't know nothin'! An' *that's* jest the bigness of it all, boss, ef you kill me fer not makin' it more!"

"Let it go at that now. Go help hunt the fellow down, and if he is found, take him! Alive if possible, but—take him anyway!"

For reasons of his own Major Nightmare took no further part in the hot search which was still under way. He felt fairly confident that Steele Slocum had not yet escaped to outer air, and after the precautions which he knew were set in motion the instant that alarm was sent forth, he believed such an escape was among the impossibilities. Death or recapture was but a question of minutes, and that being so, why should he risk his precious life?

"The cool devil stripped Jeeters, and he'll make his mark—make it mighty deep and mighty red!—before he goes down!"

But, though the end of that search had not yet come, and the Stay-in Sport was still uncaught, Major Nightmare was brooding over other matters just at present, and from the tone of his exclamation given as two figures hastily came forward into the light cast down from the rude chandelier, a shrewd observer might have suspected thoughts and comers were closely connected.

"They haven't caught the fellow, yet?" asked the first of those two persons, an anxious expression marking his face.

"Just what I was on the point of asking you, John Edgar," quickly responded the outlaw leader. "And you, señora, are not—"

"Wild with suspense, no less! Poor Carmen will have it that, spite of all, yon rascal is the villain she has been hunting for so long! You ought to know if he is, sir, and if you'd only assure—"

"Halt thee, Juan Edgardo!" sharply interposed the woman in masculine garb, one small but firm hand passionately striking his lips. "Say no more, I bid thee! Carmen Diaz can speak for herself, and—That son of ten thousand devils will be brought back, señor?"

"Dead or alive, he will be brought back, señora," promptly and confidently replied Major Nightmare.

"No, no! *not dead—living!*" almost screamed the Spanish woman, wildly gesticulating in her excitement. "He must talk—he must say true! My poor sister! My Rosina! He must say whither she lies—in life or in a cold, cruel grave!"

John Edgar caught her hands, holding her quiet, using eyes and voice to calm her half-crazed passions, while Major Nightmare, his face hidden from observation by the mask which he invariably wore while at the Retreat or on his raids, watched them in silence.

So far as he knew, these two were man and wife, who had been "picked up" on the trail to Camp Climax, less than a week before that day. He had known nothing of that capture until later, but then from talk came understanding, at least in part, even as still more was fated to come soon from that chance speculation.

Having partially quieted the woman, John Edgar turned toward the road-agent chief, speaking almost apologetically:

"The poor child has brooded over her loss so long, sir, that she's nearly crazy. As a gentleman, I ask you to overlook—"

"That's all right, Edgar," with an affable wave of one gloved hand. "I heard and saw enough to get an inkling of the matter, and while I'm inclined to believe Señora Carmen is barking up the wrong tree just at present, I both hope and believe I can help her to play even."

"You can—you know—"

"Nothing to a moral certainty, señora," bowed the outlaw. "When I have heard your story with a little more fullness, perhaps I can say more. Not that I'm asking your confidence, of course!"

"It's like this," quickly put in Edgar, stepping in front of the Spaniard. "My wife had a sister; older than she of course, but loved to adoration. A fellow who called himself Hernando Bernal came down there—over the Grande, you understand?—and when he went away, he took Rosina with him."

"Through magic, señor!" pantingly cried Carmen, pressing to the front. "Million devils claw the foul necromancer! Only thus—only through the aid of Satan, could he so fatally blind the eyes of my darling sister! Only through—You will have him brought back alive, señor? You will turn him over to me, that I may unlock his lips with the point of this—so!"

One hand plucked a flashing blade from her bosom, giving it a wild flourish that caused Major Nightmare to start back a pace, so nar-

rowly did his mask escape that keen, deadly point.

"Carmen! you must collect yourself!" expostulated Edgar, but the road-agent chieftain quickly said:

"She will never harm one who asks no greater favor than to stand her friend through thick and thin. Am I wrong, señora?"

"Your voice sounds true, señor, but—"

"She's thinking of that rascal, major," hurriedly interposed Edgar, clumsily striving to cover what he feared was an awkward slip. "If he should get clear off, what would be her fate? If he should denounce her as one of the party here, what next?"

"He can't get clear, man!" came the impatient retort. "Every way is guarded, and my bloodhounds are scenting him out at their leisure. If you are so fearful of his escape, why not join them? I'll go bail no harm comes to your wife while you're absent."

John Edgar hesitated, but while plainly loth to leave his loved one in such company, he still less liked to openly oppose that authority.

"Go, Juan," said Carmen herself, in low, musical tones, seemingly winning the mastery of her feverish excitement during that brief pause. "I must know the truth! Bring him back for my eyes to study, my tongue to question!"

"And while you are thus doing your duty, friend, Señora Carmen can clear up a few points which may do more than all else to bring the whole truth to light. You'll find us here when you come back, Edgar."

The husband lingered to whisper a few hasty words to his wife, then looked to his pistols and hurried off to join the searchers for Silky Steele.

Major Nightmare reached out a hand as though to clasp that of the fair Spaniard, but Carmen was full of her troubles, and gave him no opening for a display of gallantry.

A flood of words poured forth from her lips; sentences so involved and confused as to almost defy understanding, at first, thickly sprinkled with Spanish words and phrases as to make a literal transcript out of the question. Summed up and boiled down, the story Major Nightmare listened to amounted to about this:

A young and dashing foreigner, who claimed "the States" as his home, came to the sunny region near the city of Mexico, where Carmen and Rosina Diaz had lived since birth. The elder sister fell in love with the gay stranger, and against the advice of mother, priest, friends, she fled under the moon one hapless night, never more to be seen by her sorrowing relatives.

Search was made, pursuit given, but in vain. The American had laid his plans carefully and without thought of expense; he reached the border with his lady-love, and once over that river, its waters seemed to have covered all with oblivion.

For a time, that is to say. For months and even years, for little Carmen had grown to be a woman before word came across the river from poor Rosina.

"And then it was but a whisper—but a breath as of one dying, señor!" brokenly murmured the woman, all passion drowned by grief, it seemed.

The message had passed through many hands, had been repeated by many pair of lips as it was passed along from one to another; for there was no word in writing, that first whisper from the lost one.

"It only told that Rosina—sainted sister!—was suffering the penalty all must pay who fly in the face of the mother church! But later a plainer word came; writing, señor, which told us how bitterly the poor child been deceived by that traitor!"

"You are sure that writing was from your sister, señora?"

"Not from her hand, but from her lips, señor! She was ill—that son of a million devils had broken her spirit, her strength! Oh! if Mary Mother would only bring him under my knife this moment!"

That fierce frenzy died out almost as swiftly as it had risen, and Major Nightmare patiently waited until Carmen was more composed.

"You say this American was named Hernando Bernal! That, translated, would mean Ferdinand Bernard, I believe."

"You know him? That gray-eyed demon—but I always believed he had eyes like the starless night!"

"So had the man I have in mind, dear friend," quickly said the outlaw, catching her trembling hands between his, drawing her palpitating form closer to his side. "And he had a wife whom he called Rosa, or Rose, whose face was a poem, whose eyes were a midnight dream!"

"A wife? But no! she said she was no wife! She said he had murdered her soul and body! She said—"

"Or some evil tongue said as much for her! Did you ever think of that possibility, Carmen?" his left arm stealing gently about her waist, though as yet without venturing to actually clasp it as man clasps woman. "Might it not be that Rosina was too happy in her new

home to send a message to her people—the people who had done their best to rob her of her true-love?"

"You mean—what do you mean, señor?" pantingly asked Carmen, her lithe frame quivering, her dark eyes filled with mingled fear, doubt, and dawning hope as they turned upward to meet the orbs that flashed from back of that sable mask.

"I mean—But my friend was not named Bernard, or—"

"Wait! I have it here—the true name!" gasped Carmen, her unsteady hand feeling for and bringing forth a worn card from her bosom.

"I can not say it—my tongue is so clumsy! But you—'tis in your own language, señor! Read—his name—the name of the villain who stole my poor sister to her eternal death!"

Major Nightmare caught hastily at the card, turning it toward the light, the better to decipher those dim marks. He had keen eyes, and that name was familiar to him, so a single glance was sufficient to win him the information he desired, just then.

But instead of directly pronouncing that name, he thrust the card into his own pocket, his arm shooting around Carmen's waist, drawing her almost fiercely to his breast, as he bent his head to utter:

"Carmen, loveliest of all women! I knew that man; I know him to this day! I can tell you much—so much! But, is it worthy while to take all that trouble?"

Carmen gazed wonderingly, doubtfully into those blazing eyes. Something she saw there which caused her to shrink away with a sharp cry of angry fright, which sound brought a clear shout from the darkness beyond the entrance to the rock-chamber; then John Edgar, hand on his revolver, came dashing into the apartment!

CHAPTER XII.

MAJOR NIGHTMARE FIGHTS SHY.

"NOT a word, not a hint, if you love your sister!" swiftly whispered the outlaw, as he pushed Carmen from him, stepping back a pace, then turning to face the strongly excited man who just then made his entrance.

"Carmen—I heard—"

"Nothing to raise alarm or call for such significant fingering, my dear fellow!" curtly interrupted Major Nightmare, with a nod and a glance toward that partially drawn weapon. "There is some news, that you return so speedily, of course!"

John Edgar was taken aback by a reception so different from what he had anticipated. He glanced from one to the other, but Carmen was still too greatly shaken for speech, and the road-agent chieftain had a chance to put in another sentence.

"You come to announce the recapture of Steele Slocum, then, friend?"

"No—there's no news—no fresh alarm. But—Carmen, why did you cry out? I surely heard—"

"Oh, Juan!" almost sobbed the woman, springing forward and locking her arms about his neck. "He knows! He knows of Rosina! He says—what did you say, señor?" turning an appealing glance toward that dark figure, now drawn coldly erect, with arms folded across his chest.

"Nothing to cause all this commotion, surely, señora."

"But you surely said something, or she wouldn't—Quiet, Carmen, my angel, my wife!" just brushing her brow with his mustached lips, then gently putting her aside, to confront the outlaw. "Please explain, Major Nightmare, since that is the only name you have given us."

"The name—the card!" cried Carmen, flashing forth anew. "He has it! He said he knew—Oh, señor!" falling upon her knees with hands clasped and tears trickling from her dark eyes. "If you are human, tell me of my poor, lost sister!"

"Tell her or—tell me, sir!" almost harshly added John Edgar.

Major Nightmare quietly produced the card, giving it a glance before tossing it across to the man.

"I hardly fancy your tones, Mr. Edgar, but I'll look over that, since a lady is present. That name! I simply said I once knew a man who was called Basil Imroy."

"The thief of my sister! Tell me—where is he now?"

"Ask the winds, señora, and they can answer you just as positively as I can," laughingly retorted the outlaw.

"But you can explain how, and when, and where you knew him?"

"All of which would be far too long a tale for the telling, just at present, dear Edgar," smoothly answered Major Nightmare, with an evasive wave of his gloved right hand. Then, too, I'm not so sure the lady is strong enough to endure further excitement."

"Better that than longer doubts, señor! If you will—"

"But I will not, just at present," was the rude

interruption. "After all, my Basil Imroy may not be yours."

"It's not a common name, major," expostulated Edgar, "and just one word might be enough to—"

"And it might be too much, dear fellow! Nothing for nothing is a mighty good motto for a business man to live up to, and I'm pure business, or I'm nothing!"

"You mean—if it is payment you ask, sir," hesitated Edgar, only to be cut short by the outlaw.

"I mean that one good turn deserves another, John Edgar. I can't explain everything just at present, for reasons which I hold are good and sufficient: one of them is that I'd ought to be urging on this hunt for the runaway sport!"

"But later: you will speak out plainly, then?"

"Whether I will or not, depends mainly on yourself—and on your wife," with a nod toward Carmen Diaz.

"And he is still living: this Basil Imroy?"

"He was, when I last had the pleasure of speaking with him."

The young man flushed hotly, for he could not help realizing the mockery which lay beneath that bland sentence. His eagerness to learn the whole truth lay in his love for Carmen, but he began to feel that he was paying a heavy penalty in having to submit to such treatment.

"Come, Carmen," he said, turning away, one arm lending the agitated woman the support she really needed, just then. "We are not wanted here any longer, and—"

"Don't go off in a huff, old man," interposed the outlaw, coolly. "What is postponed may not be entirely refused, bear in mind. The Basil Imroy I knew, may not prove to be the man you are looking for; I never swore he was, mind you, though I really believe he is!"

"What matter, since you refuse to tell us of him?"

"Are you willing to pay my price for that information, Edgar?"

"How can I?" with hot resentment flaming up in his bold blue eyes. "I had no great amount to start with. I'm only a poor cowboy, as you might say, when all's told! But what little we did have, your fellows took charge of when they rounded us up. You ought to know that!"

"I know it, friend. And I'm rejoiced to hear you use the correct term: 'taken charge of' is not 'robbery'! When we shake hands and say good-by to each other, every dollar shall be returned to you, never fear."

"If I do fear, it is solely on account of my wife, sir!"

"Now you're mounting your high-horse, and that's worse than foolish, Edgar. First, because it could only make me worse if I was really your enemy. Second, because it might turn what is good-will to bad, if my temper was as hot as yours appears to be. Now—business!"

"You say I can serve you, by serving your wife? Good enough, so far! I'll do all I can to clear up the mystery which seems to cover your fair lady's past, provided you will agree to serve me in turn."

"How can I do that?"

"By serving your own interests at the same time, dear boy! You're far from being a fool, and so you must know that this little affair will—Who comes there?"

Sharp and fierce his challenge rung forth as the sounds of hasty footfalls came from beyond the circle of light, and a revolver flew out of its scabbard, only to lower its muzzle as a reply came:

"Jest me, boss!" spluttered a rough-clad fellow, checking himself on the edge of the chamber. "Thar's a racket o' some sort bu'stin' loose back in the hills, an' I reckon—"

"What sort of a racket? Quick, man!"

"Shootin' an' yelpin', like they was a right smart fight gwine on, boss! An' so I reckoned I'd best come an' let ye know, fer—"

"Fire and furies! can that cursed sport have slipped through?" raged the outlaw, springing toward the entrance, adding: "Follow me, Tom! I may have use for you!"

John Edgar mechanically moved in the same direction, but only for a couple of paces. Then he turned, to gently place his hands on the shoulders of the Spanish woman, pushing her head back until his keen gaze could cover her face.

"Carmen!"

She smothered a sob, then met his gaze, half-wonderingly.

"Carmen?"

This time it was a question, and as the woman read something of the dark suspicion lying back of those eyes, her face flushed hotly, only to pale as swiftly; but her eyes unflinchingly met his, and her voice was steady as she spoke in reply:

"You ask something, Juan, dear; what is it?"

"I heard you scream just as I was coming back. You were greatly agitated, and I almost thought you were frightened, Carmen, did that masked devil insult you? Was he trying to make love to you—to my wife?"

"No, but—" began Carmen, only to break off with a sharp gasp and a faint cry of dawning

rage as something of the truth flashed upon her for the first time. "The cowardly cur! I'll kill him! I'll drain his foul heart of its last drop! To dare—"

"How far did he dare, Carmen, dear wife?" asked Edgar, with forced composure. "Stop to think, little woman. Say no more than the truth, but hide nothing. You surely can trust me!"

"Who else have I, Juan?" her arms winding around his neck, her red lips pressed passionately to his mouth. "Trust thee? Ay! even before the Holy Virgin, my Juan!"

"Then—calm thyself, angel! Tell me, slow, calm, true, but tell me all, even to the slightest item. What said he, wife?"

Though that calmness was so plainly forced, it produced the desired effect upon the woman, and growing cooler, she repeated all that was said and done during that interview with Major Nightmare.

Once more she vowed vengeance, but once more John Edgar proved himself a wise counselor.

"He is a treacherous dog, and some day he shall suffer a cur's fit fate, but just now we are wholly at his mercy, Carmen. At a word from his lips, I would die, and you—no, no!" with somber decision in face and voice, as he drew Carmen with him out of the rock-chamber. "We must fight the devil with fire, my angel! We must pretend to fall in with his views, until we can give him and his demons the slip for good and for all!"

"But not—if his vile hand dares to touch me, Juan, I'll drive this keen blade to his black heart!"

"Hist, Carmen! not so loudly!" whispered Edgar, as they made their way through the gloomy passage. "No harm shall come to thee while I live, but that I may continue to live, for thy sake, darling! be wary! I will ever keep close to thee, and while I am nigh, even that monster will hardly dare go so far as to offer insult!"

Meanwhile, Major Nightmare had hastened to the main entrance to the subterranean retreat—that through which Steele Slocum had been borne in an unconscious state, early that same forenoon.

Once there, he sharply questioned the men he found on guard, but without learning much more than the messenger had already told him. Firearms had been discharged and yells given, far away among those wild hills. From the echoes, the fight, if fight it had been, occurred on the opposite side of that rocky range; but no sounds had been heard from there since the man was sent in with the alarm.

Knowing as he did what prompt precautions had been taken to guard all known methods of exit from the den, Major Nightmare could not bring himself to believe that this firing could have aught to do with the fugitive Stay-in-Sport, but he bade one of the guards make his way over the ridge, to ascertain the nature of that alarm, if possible.

"Come back by the nearest route; through the tunnel, if you have to cross clear over. Bring word to me. I'll be in the chamber where the sport downed Ben Jeeters. Off with you, and don't let grass grow under your hoofs!"

Lingering for a few minutes at the entrance, moodily musing, Major Nightmare then turned and mechanically picked his way back to the room where he had so abruptly parted from John Edgar and his Mexican wife.

"Gone, of course!" he muttered, after a swift glance around that dimly-lighted recess, but with a trace of vexed disappointment in his tones which that closely-fitting mask could not entirely disguise or smother. "Did she tell him anything? If so, how much? Curse him for a jealous donkey! 'Twas all I could do to keep from boring his thick skull with a blue pill!"

With fingers tightly interlocked behind his back, Major Nightmare paced slowly to and fro, his head bowed, his occasional mutterings rising to audible speech.

"Is it worth while? Is the game worth the powder? She's a bewitching piece, for a surety! But—women have ever brought me bad luck!"

His steps quickened as though keeping time with his pulse as he recalled the woman who had lain for so short a space within his warm embrace. Truly he had said she was bewitching, and the masculine garb she wore only heightened those alluring charms in his estimation.

"Basil Imroy—Basil the devil!" with a short, hard chuckle. "What matter, just so the bait holds her within reach of my arms? As well that as another, and she gave me the cue with her own red lips! Red and dewy and ripe as— Curse that Edgar! Why must he have come back just at that instant? Another minute—"

His hands unlocked, to strike viciously at vacancy. If John Edgar had come into the rock-chamber just then, he would have risked meeting something sharper and more deadly than harsh words!

If John Edgar came not, another surely must

have done so, for, without sound or warning, a heavy blow took Major Nightmare squarely on the crown of his head, felling him like a stricken beef!

CHAPTER XII.

SCOUTING UNDERGROUND.

SEEING no cause for taking unusual precautions, the men whose approach had sent Steele Slocum and his present companions so hastily to cover, came noisily on, and their heavy heels plainly betrayed their progress to those listening ears. Thus it was that, though he could not see them, Silky Steele knew that barely a score feet of space divided that party from the masked refuge when they came to a halt.

"What ye reckon it's all 'bout, anyway, pardner?" asked a shrill, squeaky voice, as that shuffling, clattering sound died away.

"You tell! There's a row o' some sort, an' ef we don't ketch onto the rights of it, the boss 'll ax what're we hyar fer? An' when he comes to the bother o' axin'—"

"It's stan' from under, an' dodge 'em as kin!" shrilled the first voice. "I'm gwine funder, I am!"

"That's all right, pardner, but I'm gwine to send my eyes on ahead o' my karkiss, I bel! The boss is turrible cranky, as you 'siniwate, but thar's wuss things then cranks in this hyar world, ye don't want to fergit! An' one o' them same things is a p'izen cuss like we're tryin' fer to smell out—aa' that's gospel!"

"Then you reckon—"

"I cain't make out how it kin come so, but don't it begin fer to look that way?"

"How could he git out o' the hole, though?"

"You tell, fer I don't know how!"

"Augh, shet down yer windmills!" growled a third voice, and its owner strode forward, to pause with part of his person actually closing the loophole which Silky Steele had left in the rocks. "Tain't the why we've got to do with, but the how! The card-sharp hes skinned out. The boss says ketch him. We cain't find him inside, then we've got to hunt him t'other place. See?"

"The boss says 'ketch,' but I take notice he hain't doin' no reachin' out fer to help in the ketchin' part!" came that squeaky voice. "Fer why? I hain't axin' that—not out loud! An' so I says: I'm gwine on funder, as less resk to me own self!"

"The gwine on part's all right," grumbled the second speaker, "but when it comes to t'other part, I'm talkin' out flat-footed: no tryin' to ketch alive fer me! Not with Silky Slocum! Ef I kin git in a few center-shots fu'st, I'm gwine to be in he-ole luck, I call it!"

"He hain't more'n a man, is he?"

"But he's all man, with a tetch o' devil throwed in fer spice! An' ef ary ten men kin rope an' tie him, when he's got his eyes open an' tools in his paws, then I want to know!"

"You'll keep on wantin', too, ef we stop hyar all day an' night! I'm gwine funder, to see who kicked up yen bobbery, I bel!"

The party passed on, giving the fugitives a chance for free breathing once more.

The Stay-in Sport would hardly have been human had he not felt a certain amount of gratification in this blunt tribute to his manhood, even from the lips of such scum, and he chuckled softly as those heavy footfalls died away in the distance.

"They've gone," huskily muttered Cracked Bell, a few hours later. "Cain't we skin out now! Wouldn't it be best fer to make a try afore them p'izenimps come back ag'in?"

"You don't think that way, Molly?" asked the sport, his eyes turning upon that dusky face, now hardly to be seen at all, even by his keen vision.

"No. Go now—bad! Stay—best, me t'ink!"

"Just my sentiments, though I couldn't boil it down so fine if I was to keep trying for a month of Sundays!" approvingly whispered the Stay-in Sport. "What do you say to that, Peter?"

"I don't—Molly's only a Injun—she hain't fit fer—"

"Treason, stratagems and spoil? Well, so much the better for those who'd be mighty hard put to it to swear they carried a head on their shoulders if 'twasn't for just such a helpless creature as Injun—Ahem!"

It was not often that Silky Steele felt abashed or at a loss for words, but as he caught that gaze: steady, mild, yet keen and glowing through that semi-darkness, a spell seemed to bind his glibly-moving tongue, and a curious, prickly sensation warned the skin of his back. It was like a charge of electricity locally applied, and the gambler hardly knew whether he liked it or not.

Injun Molly whispered something to Peter, and Bell spoke in turn:

"I reckon that's so: better talk o' how we're gwine to git cl'ar o' theseimps, then jabberin' 'bout a squaw! An' so—you've done all the good work so fur, stranger, an' I don't reckon we kin do better then to foller your lead cl'ar through. So—you say, boss!"

There was a brief period of silence, part of which was occupied by the card-sharp in rally-

ing from that odd sensation, the rest in rapidly reviewing the situation. When he did speak, it was briefly and to the point.

"If you both leave the decision to me, then, I say—lay low and wait."

Peter Bell tugged at his long, bushy beard, then glanced helplessly toward Injun Molly. The squaw seemed to understand, for she said: "Dat good—so much. Wait, yes; but wait how much?"

"Well, that's a question easier asked than answered," hesitated the gambler, his hand mechanically rising to his chin, only to drop away the next instant, while something like an oath rose in his throat.

"Anything bit ye, boss?" quavered Cracked Bell, noting that start.

Then it all came out, for the superstitious gambler could no longer contain himself.

"You see this?" leaning forward to where a ray of light could touch his marred chin, spitefully tapping the doctored wound with a fingertip. "That's where a woman shot me. Not much to howl about, is it?"

"Jest a crease, 'pears like."

"Just a crease, as you say: just through the meat, without touching bone or gristle! In a week any one else would hardly know there'd been any hurt at all! And yet, Peter, I'm giving you a square deal when I say that I'd heap sight rather that bit of lead had gone through any other portion of my carcass!"

"Long o' sp'ilin' yer good looks, ye reckon?" feebly ventured the mountain vagabond.

"Spell it 'good luck,' and right there you have it!" almost viciously retorted the gambler. "Maybe you don't know what that means to a thoroughbred sport, Peter! Maybe you're not—well, call it superstitious, if you like the term!"

"Ef that means a b'lief in luck, how kin I help b'lievin'?"

"Put it there, Peter!" with a hearty grip of the hand, then speaking with greater ease than before. "Some people would call it folly, but I know better, for I've proved it, times without number! I had a mascot, and it grew right here on my chin!"

"Let me come to a tough place; let me be in doubt which card to play, which move to make, what step to take; all I needed was to give that bit of hair a twist with my fingers. If it came to a point, smooth and trim, each hair lying in place, then I knew I was right, and had only to go ahead. If it cut up rusty; if it split up, and felt like a bunch of hay, and frazzled out at the end, then I knew I was wrong, and would surely get downed if I kept on! So, all I had to do was to try another lead, until my mascot told me to go ahead. See?"

"I reckon you mean it, pardner?" mumbled Peter, dubiously.

"It's Gospel truth, if I am saying it," was the serious, almost gloomy response. "That crazy Mexican cat barked me. Those Bad Dreams roped, drugged, toted me over here. And then—Satan toast him for supper!—Major Nightmare had my chin clipped, as you see!"

"Waal, I be dug-gun! Reckon he knowed it was a mascot?"

"I don't see how he could have dropped to that, but—don't keep me brooding over it, man!" rousing himself with sudden fierceness that caused Peter Bell to draw back close to Injun Molly. "It's bad enough to know that I'm like a ship without a rudder—to feel that I've lost the best and smartest part of me—without talking it over!"

Silence fell over the little party, which lasted until Silky Steele broke it, now looking and feeling more like his old-time self:

"I was a fool, just now, Peter, and you, Molly. Forget what I said, if you can. Mascot or no mascot, I'm in this game to stay, and what I lack in wit I'll try to make up in grit! Now—one word more."

"I'm almost positive none of the road-agents even dream of this opening. If they knew anything about it, they surely would have put a guard on duty here, just as they did at the other places, when I broke away from them."

"Granting so much, I don't know of a spot where we'll be any safer than we are right here, until dark comes to cover our movements. Before night does come, we can't stir outside without great risk of being discovered by some of those prowlingimps. Doesn't that look reasonable?"

"Dat good—all good!"

"I think so my own self, and lay low is the watchword. But—I'm going to take a bit of a scout back the way I came here. It can't do harm to us, and may pan out some good."

"We go, too?" quickly asked Injun Molly, but Slocum shook his head.

"No, you'll stay right here. I know the lay of the ground, and can get over it without a light, but you—that's different."

"You'll come back? You won't—ef you shouldn't—"

"If I don't come back, it'll be because I've croaked, not because I've deserted you to lessen my own risk, be sure," curtly muttered the Stay-in Sport, settling the pistols in his belt while adding: "If I'm not back by good and dark, pull out and do your level best. I'll send

a whistle ahead to let you know it's me coming, Peter, so keep ears open."

Without pausing for further doubts, Silky Steele crept away through the darkness, retracing the line he had followed in making his escape.

He had no settled hopes to urge him on, and it was more to kill time than aught else, that he began this venture.

And yet—if good luck should favor him, he might pick up a few points which would stand him in good stead after he had fairly given Major Nightmare and his Bad Dreams the slip.

"For I'll play even if it takes a lifetime!" he grimly vowed, his mind reverting to the theft of his cherished mascot!

Profiting by his recent experience, Slocum made quite rapid progress through the darkness. He felt tolerably sure the bottom of the irregular passage was without pitfalls similar to the one into which he had so fortunately tumbled while dogging the road-agents, and he was not many minutes in reaching the narrow crack through which he had crowded himself after rallying from that same fall.

Once through this, he paused to use his ears; eyesight was of no avail, just then, for all around him was a darkness so dense as to seem solid enough to pick up by handfuls!

All was still. Not a sound came to indicate danger, and striking a match, Silky Steele swiftly picked out the best method of leaving that shallow depression for the firm passage above.

The one match sufficed for this, and creeping, clinging, pulling himself upward and onward, the Stay-in Sport succeeded in gaining the narrow ledge along which he had watched his enemies file, then left it for the easier, safer passage beyond.

After this point was passed, the rest was comparatively smooth sailing, and by the sense of touch added to an occasional pause for recalling what his eyes had drank in while dogging the road-agents, Slocum contrived to make his way to where that division of passage took place, without accident or serious trouble befalling him.

Once there, he hesitated, for the hundredth time regretting the loss of his guiding mascot; if that could only be consulted!

"I'd know, in place of going it blind! Devil save you for my paying off, Major Nightmare!" muttered Slocum, almost viciously.

Then he crouched low down in the shadow, for a hasty step made itself heard, and a few seconds later a man came under that dimly burning candle. The light was strong enough, however, to let Silky Steele make out the face and dimensions of John Edgar, for he it was, hastening off in obedience to the blunt hint given him by Major Nightmare.

Edgar passed along the main channel, and acting on impulse, the Stay-in Sport glided along under the candle, taking the course Edgar had followed in coming. And then, catching the sound of human voices, Silky Steele traced them until he caught sight of the speakers!

CHAPTER XIV.

A PEEP UNDER THE MASK.

LITTLE suspecting what ears and eyes were taking notes, Major Nightmare gave freer rein to his evil passions than otherwise would have been the case.

Silky Steele, crouching there in the darkness, hand on weapon in readiness to get in one good blow before death in case of discovery, both saw and heard more than Carmen Diaz did, thanks to her overpowering passion: she could see and think of but one end, just then.

While Slocum was left in the dark, so far as their actual relations were concerned, he was shrewd enough to see that his former belief had done the Mexican woman an injustice: she was not the mate of this masked law-breaker, though she might not be much better, for all that.

"Birds of a feather!" grimly reflected the spy, as he watched and took notes. "And yet—she's more of a cat, I take it! Mighty keen claws, too! Go easy, old goat, or you'll lose some of your wool!"

At first the eavesdropper took but an idle interest in that talk, despite the fact that it bore on the same point which had so closely concerned him, at his first rousing from that drugged stupor. Despite his reckless daring, never more positively displayed than in this voluntary return to this death-trap, he could not help reflecting how great was the risk of discovery in case any one should come from the passage along which he had crept to locate those voices.

In hopes of securing a better location for hearing in safety, the Stay-in Sport began a cautious search, which quickly resulted in a discovery which promised him the desired results.

By creeping across to the opposite side of the passage, he found a crack in the wall as it narrowed at the entrance to the chamber, and squeezing himself through this, he managed to pass beyond the reach of the dim light cast forth by the candles studding the wooden cross; and then stealing back of the rude couch on which he had lain while unconscious, he succeeded in

removing a gray blanket as a cover. With this spread over his person, Silky Steele crouched low against the rear wall, able to both see and hear in comparative comfort.

"Stick to your honey-fugling, major!" he mentally said, when all fixed. "There's more money in that for you than in smelling around this lay-out! If you should try that—well, your mascot won't save your meat-house!"

Silky Steele was hardly conscious of these thoughts, however, for Carmen Diaz was nearing the end of her story, and he was growing deeply interested in its outcome.

His suspicions that Major Nightmare knew far more concerning that tragedy than he cared to admit, grew as he watched and listened, and he even found time to wonder a bit at her blindness: could she not see how surely that villain was playing a part?

Then came the first dropping of that hypocritical mask, and the Stay-in Sport was beginning to smile as he saw a hot love-scene ahead, when John Edgar put in his appearance.

Steele Slocum took careful note of that face, for he was after information, and the more faces he saw while in such company, the surer would be his blows when the proper time came for striking back at the outlaws who had given him so much bother.

Then came the excited guard, with his tidings; though that puzzled Slocum, for he had no means of connecting it with the firing which had taken place so long before; perhaps he might have done so, had he known in what healthy awe Major Nightmare was held by his henchmen, and how long it took for even the bravest among the road-agents to pluck up courage enough to carry him a bit of what might prove unwelcome news!

Lying under his friendly cover, Silky Steele watched husband and wife as John Edgar questioned and Carmen Diaz answered. He saw that her passionate indignation was genuine, and when the couple left the rock-chamber, he had a much better opinion of them both than he would otherwise have taken away with him.

As soon as he felt fully assured they had passed out of sight and hearing, the Stay-in Sport crept forward to where a bit of white marked the dingy rock-floor; it was the card which he had seen fall unheeded by all, when Major Nightmare tossed it so rudely toward John Edgar.

"Basil Imroy, eh?" muttered Slocum, pausing near the light long enough to read the written characters, then slipping the card into a pocket. "Not at all likely I'll ever forget that name, but—maybe those marks will come in good play when—We'll see!"

A hasty search convinced him that there was nothing more to pick up of use in that quarter, and feeling that he would be far safer elsewhere, just then, he stole out of the recess, still shrouded in the gray blanket.

None too soon, either! He had just gained the point where was offered a choice of passages, when he heard the sound of a heavy footfall; and crouching low, covered by the friendly blanket, he waited until the man passed him by, recognizing Major Nightmare!

As seen, the road-agent chieftain passed directly along to the rock-chamber where he had left husband and wife, doubtless intending to renew the proposition which had been so abruptly broken off by the coming of the guard, with news of firing outside.

Without a sound to betray himself, Steele Slocum followed after the gloomily brooding villain, pausing at the entrance, watching and listening as Major Nightmare strode back and forth, now and then giving audible utterance to his evil thoughts.

As he watched, Steele Slocum felt his hatred growing stronger. It was in his heart to spring forward and slay this knave, knowing as he did what black crimes and cruel outrages were lying at his door. And during those few minutes, though he knew it not, Major Nightmare was hovering on the dread boundary line of death!

No doubt he richly deserved death, but—would such a death—painless, coming without pang or fear, a single step carrying him from life to the other shore—would that make full amends for his many crimes?

That reflection came just in time to temper the fierce hatred which urged the gambler to slay, but it was not pity that stayed his hand or tempered his stroke. He hated this demon too deeply!

He sprang forward, striking with clubbed revolver as he came, and, never knowing what hurt him, Major Nightmare fell to the rock-floor, a quivering mass of evil!

Swiftly reversing his weapon, Silky Steele faced around, ready to meet any foe who might have caught that resounding crack! But none such were to be seen or heard, and replacing the weapon in its scabbard, he stooped over the still shivering form, plucking at the mask which so sacredly concealed the real face of Major Nightmare.

The fastenings resisted his pluck, however, and thinking better of his first impulse, knowing that at any moment he might be surprised by the enemy, Steele Slocum picked the limp body

up in his arms and swiftly carried it out of the chamber, heading for the division so often alluded to.

Dropping the body at the mouth of the tunnel which he had twice traversed that day, the gambler rudely tore away the mask, with its fastenings, then struck a match, and holding the flickering blaze over that exposed face, greedily took in the vision thus afforded.

A smothered ejaculation rose in his throat as he saw who Major Nightmare really was, but before he could do or say more, an angry cry startled him, followed almost instantly by a shot from a revolver, the bullet from which stung his cheek as though a red-hot iron had been slapped against his face!

Swift as thought the Stay-in Sport fired at the flash which lit up the darkness, acting by pure instinct. For, as the bravest of men will, he mistook that graze for a fatal wound, and his one longing was for vengeance.

Even as he fired, wild yells filled the underground retreat, and at least a portion of these seemed to come from the same quarter as that first shot. Still, resolved to rejoin his friends, to defend them to the bitter end, now that discovery seemed inevitable, Steele Slocum dashed in that direction, knife in one hand, pistol in the other, striking to clear the way as he leaped.

His foot struck a prostrate form, almost casting him headlong to that rough floor, but rallying, he sped on, grimly laughing, as he knew that his lead had not been wholly wasted.

"Come and take me—but bring your shrouds with you!" he cried, in reckless defiance, so certain was he that a final struggle must come right soon.

But no living enemies barred his way, and all behind him was cast into confusion by the discovery of Major Nightmare, seemingly dead!

Yet that fierce exaltation lasted longer than Steele Slocum knew, and carried him considerably further than he gave it credit for, when at length he realized the truth: that it was only the one man who had been in front of him when the light of the match betrayed his presence.

During all that blind flight, Slocum had kept his left shoulder in contact with the wall, as the shelf by means of which the outlaws passed the shallow pit lay on that side. He never once gave a thought to the possibility of his passing by that point without noting the fact, and he took that precaution merely to guard himself against taking another and possibly less lucky tumble; yet pass it he did, and his first intimation to that effect came when he found himself stumbling up an abrupt rise in the floor!

He tripped, falling with nasty force, but just then he hardly felt the bruises which he received, for he knew by instinct that he had gone astray in his haste. But how far?

Quickly rallying, Silky Steele crept along that strange rise, using his hands to make sure that instinct had not played him false. It had not! This was indeed strange ground to him, and of such a nature that he surely must have remembered it had he passed over it once, let alone twice, at such comparatively brief intervals.

At first he hoped it was but a portion of the shelf of which mention has been made, over which the road-agents had passed while he lay beneath the ledge of rock at the bottom of that shallow pit; but his feeling of touch quickly robbed him of that hope.

Rising to his feet, he turned in the direction from whence he had come in that too hasty flight. There was little difficulty in locating the right direction. Shouts and oaths were rolling through that rock-roofed passage, all coming from that one quarter.

Those sounds were loud enough to come from close quarters, but as the Stay-in Sport stared in that direction he could not catch even a ray of candle or torch light, and he felt tolerably certain the road-agents would not come without some such aid, even if they took the sensible precaution of sending scouts in advance.

"Risk it goes!" he grimly muttered, selecting a match from those with which the garments of Ben Jeeters were liberally supplied, and which proclaimed him an inveterate smoker. "I've got to see what sort of trap I've blundered into, and at the very worst it's only standing fire once more. I'm getting pretty well used to that, and it's not so dangerous, after all!" with a low chuckle, as his free hand gingerly touched his cheek, across which a sore welt had already risen, marking the passage of that viciously-meant shot.

By the bright if brief light Silky Steele saw enough to fully convince him that he had indeed gone astray, either passing into a side-shaft or crossing that shelf in his excitement.

The rock bottom rose abruptly in front of him, forming a tolerably steep incline for perhaps two-score feet, beyond which it might extend indefinitely; his torch could tell him no more than this.

Though all this takes space to detail, only a very few seconds had passed between his stumble and that match-burning, so those shouts of vengeful rage were hardly more clear when Silky Steele cast down the glowing bit of pine to face in that direction.

"Can I make it back to the other hole?" he asked himself, while trying to exactly estimate the space between himself and those enemies. "If I only knew how far past I have come!"

But that was the rub! He did not know, and he had no means of guessing with any certainty. He might have gone only a few yards, or the place might be many rods away: too far at least for him to win before those savage oath-flingers were upon him, as he quickly realized.

For, even as he weighed the chances, he caught sight of a dim light which rapidly approached, taking on shape and form until he made out a gaunt rufian bearing a lantern above his head.

"All right, if you *will* have it so!" he muttered, grimly, pistol in hand. "Dollars to cents I upset that lamp-post first call!"

CHAPTER XV.

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

As that grim fancy flashed across his brain, Steele Slocum lifted the revolver which he had drawn in readiness for use the instant the first suspicion of light was caught by his keen eyes.

The distance was still considerable, the target was in motion, and anything but regular at that, since he flashed the light of the lantern from side to side, now high up where some irregularity in the rocky walls suggested a possible hiding-place, now stooping in unison as he sent those yellow rays glancing along the lower strata.

But the Stay-in Sport knew himself for an expert shot, under almost any conditions, and he would have staked heavy odds on an even less favorable handicap than this.

Neither was he held back by a touch of mercy. He knew that these lawless men, at the head of whom yonder lantern-bearer was moving, were searching for him, to *kill*. They would shoot him down at sight, and glory in his last agonies were they so fortunate as to lay him low.

But, just as he was bringing his weapon to bear on that stalwart figure, the man with the lantern came to a sudden pause, then sprung to one side of the passage, where a projecting spur of rock partially concealed him from the eyes of the gambler.

Slocum instantly squatted down, to lessen the mark his own person would present, for his first and perfectly natural impression was that the road-agent had caught sight of his figure against the slope.

"That won't save ye, pardner!" muttered the fugitive, using eyes and ears as he adroitly shuffled to the right, to foil the shots which he fully anticipated would be sent humming in that direction. "I'll save one trump for you, if I have to let a dozen other tricks go slide!"

He had hardly shaped this determination when his error was revealed to him, for the brightest light of the lantern was turned upon the rocks opposite where its bearer had sprung to cover, and a hoarse voice cried out:

"Ready to dump him, mates! I heard something that—Cover those cracks, I tell ye!"

"Come out o' that, ye divil!"

"That's *what*! You're holed, critter, an' ef we hev to yank ye out, it'll be dead meat fer the trouble!"

"It's twenty to one, Silky," added the voice of the man who bore the lantern. "Come down, and well give you a white show. You can't fight an army, and you ought to know as much!"

"Keep it up, dear laddies!" chuckled the Stay-in Sport, by no means too greatly frightened to enjoy that barking on a false scent. "While you're chewing wind, I'll be simmering ways and means!"

And yet, what could he do?

The more he thought the matter over, the more firmly he believed that he had passed beyond the only place which seemed to offer him anything like safety, though even yet he could not fully understand how he could have done this.

True, he had never been over that ledge, save for a few feet where he had climbed up from that shallow depression; but from that experience, in the dark though it had been taken, the feat seemed incredible.

Even with a light to guide his feet, he would hardly have dared cross along that ledge at a run; yet, if his belief was well founded, he must have done so in utter darkness!

"Don't be a fool for lack of sense, Slocum!" again called out the lantern-bearer from his hastily-sought covert—back of a wedge of rock, high enough to form a barricade against bullets coming from the opposite wall, though, as before hinted, a goodly portion of his person was exposed to the eyes of one stationed at or near the slope.

"Sure, thin, he's frickened to dith, Oi'm t'ink-in'!"

"Button up, ye blatherin flannel-mouth!" cried still another voice from the shadows beyond that band of yellow light. "Would ye be disturbin' the pore critter at his prayers?"

"Come, sport, you might as well come down with a good grace. Show up, and I'll promise you white treatment, but if we have to go for you—good night you!"

"Good liar you!" grimly commented the

gambler, keeping run of those miss-aimed remarks, even while debating his own course.

"Dollars to pennies, a show-up would bust a cartridge in every gun of the lay-out!"

Once more Steele Slocum cursed the loss of his mascot, as he tried to decide which course was the best for him to pursue: to steal away and make the most of this respite, or to charge straight through yonder patch of light, in hopes of reaching the other passage without falling a victim to the shots or blows of the road-agents.

"I could hit the lay-out before any one of 'em all even suspected what sort of cyclone had broken loose! Even if they block the tunnel, I could eat a passage clean through. But—*what then?*"

With darkness ahead, and light behind; with only the haziest idea of how far or how near that one chance for safety lay; with the certainty that, no matter how much damage he might inflict in breaking through the ranks of his enemies, enough would be left to chase and to strike with vicious vengeance; with no time to feel his way, or to hide the method by which he had baffled them once before; with all this against him, Silky Steele was reluctantly forced to admit that such an attempt would be worse than madness.

"Even if I got through, and luck took me to the other passage without breaking my fool neck, they'd surely smoke the trick, and then what would come to Peter and Molly?"

With something akin to a sigh, the gambler abandoned that dare-devil idea as out of the question. Had only his own life been at stake, he would have acted before this, without waiting to see what efforts the road-agents yonder would make to break what, through their own mistake, looked very much like a deadlock.

"I'm caught between two fires, if this is really the pass those pesky imps thought I had taken before," his brain swiftly revolved. "Both ends were guarded *then*, and I reckon it's no better *now*. I know where *these* marks are located but how about the others? Could I get a bite while they were making a square meal? *That's* the rub!"

And a most disagreeable one it was, too! Death would not be nearly so terrible if he might die fighting, knowing that his life was being sold at a respectable price.

With varying taunts, jeers, insults and arguments, the road-agents were trying to draw their game from those rocks, of course without success. But the Stay-in Sport knew that this could not last much longer.

"They'll get worked up hot enough to make a charge, or else they'll smoke their—*I knew it!*"

"Augh, I know who's the biggest john-donk' in this section!" the man with the lantern just then blurted forth, rising from his covert and fully exposing himself. "Just a big bat, for yonder it goes! Come on, mates! We've got to go further, if we fare worse!"

It was a clumsy enough bluff, and Silky Steele instantly caught at the truth: while nearly all of the road-agents were to follow the lantern, one or more were to lie in cover, to pick off their game in case he should attempt to steal away along the back-track.

Still, this knowledge did not better his case any, and already regretting having lingered so long there instead of having improved the time by stealing to some possible refuge of safety, Silky Steele turned to mount that slope, feeling that he could make a better fight from the top than at its foot.

Only to have a bit of rock crumble under his heavy boot, causing him to fall on his hands and knees, and then slip noisily down the slope!

With a fierce shout the man with the lantern cast his light in that direction, leaping forward as he did so, and as the Stay-in Sport whirled around and regained his feet, his dark shape was thrown into prominent relief against the gray rocks forming that incline.

"There he is! Blow him to—"

Swift as thought the sport at bay took aim and fired a single shot, the heavy explosion cutting that savage sentence short, and at the same time casting all into utter darkness!

For Steele Slocum had fired at the lantern, not at its bearer!

True to his will that missile had sped, striking the brass burner squarely, shattering all before it, blotting out the light and drawing a vicious curse of fury from the road-agent.

"Shoot! Riddle the devil!" he howled, his own pistol barking as rapidly as thumb and finger could work its mechanism, while the entire passage was lighted up by the shots which his eager mates likewise discharged.

Never a word uttered the gambler, though his lip was curling with defiant scorn, but sending half a dozen shots toward that ruddy glare, without trying to pick out any particular target, he once more rushed up the incline, laughing aloud as he caught those cries and curses of pain and rage.

Pausing when at the top of that rise, he partially masked his lips with a hand, the more completely to alter his voice, then roared forth in his deepest tones:

"Hold 'em level, lads! Surrender, ye bounds! Quarter to all who knuckle, death to all others!"

Without pausing to note the effect of this ruse, Silky Steele pushed on through the darkness, reloading his pistols by sense of touch, for he heard sounds ahead which bade him be ready for another brush with the Bad Dreams.

"The guards, I reckon," he muttered, noting that wave of sound as it came from his front; it could hardly be termed a cry, nor was it exactly a whistle, though partaking of both to some degree. I'd give a finger if they'd just keep that tune in motion long enough for me to locate the organ that gives it birth!"

But that was far too much to expect, of course, and lasting only long enough to assure those to whose ears it might come, that the ones who sent it forth were on the alert, it died away once for all.

And yet—was it really a signal? Might it not be merely an echo of that rapid fusillade, sent back from some obstruction in front?

"It didn't sound *human*, that's a fact!" muttered Slocum, his pace slackening a bit as that touch of superstition awoke. "I'll buck all the men set up in front of me, but if it comes to spooks—ugh!"

Once more he bitterly felt the loss of his guiding mascot. With that to tell him if he was right, or if he ought to turn back and face the odds he already knew, how much easier would it all seem!

It was clear that his recent bluff had not been utterly wasted, since nothing was to be heard of the force whose light he had put out. Still, it was barely possible that they were creeping up on him in the dark, thanks to their familiarity with the lay of the ground, and that reflection caused the Stay-in Sport to press ahead once more.

Once again in motion Silky Steele managed to fight back all superstition, keeping one point doggedly in view; ahead lay liberty, if he could only win it!

Not knowing how closely the road-agents might be pressing him, he dared not strike a match to either light his way, or discover possible hiding-place; his sole hope lay in reaching the mouth of this pass before he was overtaken.

In the utter darkness, and on entirely unknown ground, the bravest of men are very apt to turn cowardly. Slocum did not alter so far, but it was a terrible strain on his nerves, and he gave an audible gasp of intense relief as he caught sight of a faint light not many rods ahead.

"Daylight, by glory! Now—*where are they?*"

He crept forward with increased caution, making but the faintest of sounds with even his heavy boots, using his eyes with all his skill.

He felt positive that the opening was guarded by armed enemies. It would be too rich luck, otherwise. But were they inside, or were they without? *That* was the question he would have given much to solve, just then.

He could detect no signs of human beings anywhere near the opening, but still he knew they might be lying *perdu* among those dense shadows, even then gloating over his expected capture, or his cruel death.

"All the same, I'm coming at ye, gentlemen!" the Stay-in Sport decided, pistol in hand as he stole forward with increased rapidity, for he knew that to any one coming on behind, his figure must quickly become visible against yonder light. Coming—*head-first and red-hot, too!*"

He made a dash, ready to strike or to shoot, but not a sound came to prove his fears were true, and he plunged through the opening—only to be tripped up by a noose, and feel at least two heavy bodies jump squarely upon his back!

CHAPTER XVI.

INJUN MOLLY PROVES HER FAITH.

It was with anything but an easy mind that Peter Bell regarded the sudden departure of the Stay-in Sport, notwithstanding the honest assurance which Slocum had given them.

"Even ef he means well, whar's the sense?" querulously mumbled the mountain vagabond, shifting restlessly on his seat, when hardly a score of minutes had dragged their slow length along. "What's holdin' of him so mighty long? Why don't he come back? *Ef he ever 'lowed to come!*"

Strong suspicion filled that final sentence, and the old man made a half-fierce, half-despairing gesture as he spoke.

"He will come, if he lives," Injun Molly said, using the Ute dialect, with which Peter Bell seemed perfectly familiar. "He said he would not fail us, and—*he is a man!*"

"Yes, he's a man!" echoed Bell, but putting a vastly different emphasis to the term. "And being a man, he's working for himself, not for us! Being a man—Oh, if the world was wide enough for a miserable wretch like me, to win clear of them all!"

"Even from me?" softly murmured Injun Molly, one hand upon his bowed shoulder, the other clasping one of his bony hands, her head bent around until she forced his eyes to meet her gaze.

"Better if it could come to that, even!" with a yet deeper despondency, his heavy lids closing to shut out that loving light. "What have I brought you to, child? What have I taken you from, only to drag you down to my degraded level! Only to—"

A warm, plump arm stole around his neck. A pair of soft lips pressed over his, cutting that husky lament short.

"Where else should I be, but at your side, dearest?" she whispered, drawing back her face only far enough to soothingly breathe those words. "Your level is my level, your fate my fate. Would you have it different, dearest? Would you rather drag out an existence like this, alone, unloved and uncared for?"

Once more her red lips cut short his speech, and then, with a spasmodic force, Peter Bell clasped the woman to his bosom.

For minute after minute they remained thus, Injun Molly dropping a soothing whisper occasionally, but for the most part in silence. And little by little Peter Bell seemed to rally his nerves, though his habitual despondency was not so readily to be fought away.

"It would be even more a hell on earth without you, child," he muttered, after a while. "If I didn't feel this so acutely, I'd be better able to endure such a life. But—for you to share it with me!"

"I ask nothing better, dear, unless— But there surely is light ahead! I feel it—I know it!"

"Beyond the grave, then! That light went out when poor Sandy was murdered—Heaven's hottest lightning blast the demon who ruined my last frail hope of life, by so cruelly taking his!"

In his fierce agony, Peter Bell roughly shook himself free from those loving arms, and Injun Molly, with a deep sigh, resumed her former attitude, once more the meek, silent squaw, at least in outward seeming.

"Who killed him? Why was his life cut short, just as he seemed on the point of making amends for some of his past crimes, by doing one generous, brave action?"

"God knows!" sighed the squaw resignedly.

"Better say the foul fiend knows!" bitterly cut in Bell. "Satan rules in this country, and his imps are everywhere! Judge Ramsey is one of them! Basil Imroy was another! And I'd hate to kiss the book on oath that this gambling sport is one whit above either!"

"It is your tongue, not your heart that says that, dearest," softly whispered Injun Molly, moving a bit nearer the old man, but not as yet venturing to resume her former endearments.

"It is my reason that dictates, rather! Why has he interested himself in us? Why—but to win the secret of the bonanza with which those devils in human shape credit me?"

"I cannot think so meanly of the stranger as that. I believe he helped us, just as he would have lent aid to any other fellow-beings whom he found in peril."

Peter Bell flung out a hand in a derisive gesture. Either he was a natural skeptic, or else his faith in human nature had been destroyed by long sufferings, be they merited or the result of great misfortunes.

"Just as Judge Aaron Ramsey befriended us when that gang of human devils were howling for our lives? Would he have acted the same, only for lust of gain? Would he have lifted hand or voice to save our necks from the rope, had he not believed we had a golden secret?"

"I fear not, but—"

"I know not! Didn't he betray his hand when he had us locked in with him?"

"Yes, but this stranger is not Judge Ramsey."

"He is a man!"

"He is a man," repeated Injun Molly, with still deeper earnestness in her voice, though still keeping it at a low pitch, just loud enough for the ears of her companion, without incurring any risk of attracting attention from without, in case the road-agents should be lurking nigh. "He is a true man, or my judgment goes for naught. I have watched him closely, and—"

"So has he watched you, child!" almost harshly interposed Peter Bell. "Watched you so closely that I fear—I wish we had never met him! I wish we were safe back in our mountain glen, never to abandon it more! Why should we? All hope is lost, now Sandy is dead!"

Once more the mountain vagabond gave way to miserable dejection, and once more Injun Molly strove to calm, to soothe, to encourage him, as only a true and loving woman can offer comfort.

True, her skin was bronzed, her face disfigured with spots and bands of tribal paint, her garb that of one hardly half-civilized. True it was that she spoke in a barbarous tongue, but—still she was a woman, loving and faithful.

It was a new phase in Injun Molly, so far as the outer world knew her. To them, she was cold, grave, taciturn. To the most of them she was but an Indian squaw, only a grade above the dogs that walked on four feet instead of on two!

But now, alone with the man to whose wretch-

ed life she was allied by love if not by blood, she proved herself a true consoler, and little by little Peter Bell once more rallied, until he was more like his usual self; pity that the change was not greater!

Yet that change could hardly come, now that the one hope which the future held for him seemed forever quenched. What remained but to die, as he had lived for so many years?

And yet life seemed something to cling to, even for such a miserable wreck. For, as his dejection faded away in part, Peter Bell renewed his nervous grumblings.

Even if Steele Slocum did not mean them mischief—and he was not ready to squarely admit so much—this insane freak of his could result in no good, and might work them much evil.

"What made him steal away on such a fool errand? Why couldn't he rest content here, where we had a show of safety, instead of taking the trouble and risk of hunting up our enemies?"

"He is a stranger to us. We can only guess at his motives."

"And I'm guessing they're little good!" moodily growled the old man. "But if they should be, what matter if he runs into trouble? If he is discovered by the road-agents, what will become of us?"

"Will we be worse off than if we had never met him?"

"Of course we will!" with almost vicious emphasis. "If he should be captured, don't you reckon he'd jump at the chance to buy his life by selling us out? If you do—"

"I can't think so meanly of him as that," came the quick interposition. "I believe he would die, fighting to the last, rather than betray those who had trusted him, even so little as we have done!"

"Then you're a bigger— Don't make me talk, child!" breaking off without completing his harsh sentence.

They sat in silence for some little time longer, both seemingly buried in thought, though their reflections could hardly have been of an agreeable nature.

They were suddenly roused to the grim realities of life, however, when two shots, blending into one prolonged echo, came rolling indistinctly along that gloomy passage.

Yet, deadened as those reports were, their nature could not be mistaken by either of the twain.

"I knew it!" exploded Cracked Bell, far louder than prudence would justify, springing to his feet and fumbling for his weapons. "He's run his head into danger, and now— We must get out o' this, child!"

"No—wait!"

And Injun Molly caught him in her strong young arms as he started toward the blocked-in entrance.

"He said he would come back, and he'll surely keep his word!"

"Bringing a drove of devils with him, then! I tell you our only show for safety lies in pulling out of this death-trap just as quickly as we know how!"

"Would you go without me, then?" almost sternly asked Injun Molly, relaxing her grasp, but still standing between him and the entrance.

"What do you mean by that? Are you crazy?"

"I mean that I will trust where I am trusted. I mean that I have faith in this stranger, and— Don't make me speak hard words, if you love me, dearest!"

And once more her arms were around his form, but now in an embrace of purest love.

Weak-willed from his birth, Peter Bell was not strong enough to resist this woman, and he sunk down upon the cold rock, covering his face with his unsteady hands. Injun Molly sat by his side, whispering words of cheer and of comfort, yet all the time watching and listening for the coming of the young stranger in whom she held such perfect faith.

Then came the sound of other shots, when Steele Slocum put out the light of the lantern, and once more Peter Bell broke into open rebellion.

It would be worse than suicidal to linger longer, he declared, and rudely repulsing Injun Molly as she begged to wait yet a little longer, he began tearing down the wall of rocks which hindered their exit. This done, he sternly ordered Molly to follow him, creeping forth, rifle cocked and ready for a shot; but he failed to catch sight of an enemy, and stood erect with a long breath of relief.

"Now's our time, Molly," he whispered, moving away, keeping his eyes roving about them, though he had lowered the hammer of his rifle. "If we can pass beyond that other hole he spoke of, without being seen, I do reckon we'll git clean off!"

Without a word Injun Molly followed, bow and arrow in hand, and then she took the lead as the chance offered itself.

Creeping among the rocks, using all caution, their progress was slow if sure, and considerable time was consumed in covering the space which lay between those two openings. Of course they knew nothing positive concerning the other

hole, yet the nature of the cover caused them to almost directly approach it.

Thus it chanced that they were only a few short rods distant when Steele Slocum came plunging through the masked opening, to be tripped up by a spread noose, then go down beneath two muscular knaves, whose yells of fierce exultation told how valuable they deemed their prize!

With a cry that echoed theirs, Injun Molly sprung forward a pace, lifting her bow and drawing the arrow almost to its head, then sending the winged-death true as fate, to bury itself to the feather in the ribs of one of those vindictive outlaws!

"Friends! we are friends, and coming!" she cried, shrilly, as encouragement to the young stranger in whom she had placed such strong faith, even against the judgment of her husband.

She was stringing another arrow, but the Stay-in Sport was making a vigorous fight, despite his disadvantage, and she dared not shoot for fear of striking the wrong target. Then—with a mighty heave and a toss that seemed more than human, Silky Steele rose to his feet, casting his adversary headlong away—to drive him squarely through that opening among the rocks!

"Quick! see!" cried Injun Molly, darting forward and striking her left hand sharply against a large boulder which stood above that opening. "Dis—upset, so!"

As she dropped her bow to throw her whole strength against the upper side of the rock, both Silky Steele and Peter Bell divined her hope, and promptly seconded her exertions. One united effort, then the mass of rock slowly started, to finally topple over with a crash, most effectually sealing that mode of exit from the robbers' den!

CHAPTER XVII.

MAJOR NIGHTMARE FEELS HIS WAY.

ALTHOUGH he could hardly appreciate the fact at first, Major Nightmare was in great good luck, and ought to have vowed a score wax candles to Dame Nature for endowing him with such an extraordinarily thick skull.

The Stay-in Sport had not spared his muscle in dealing that blow, and any less thick combination of bones would have given way before that shock; even its owner was knocked senseless, though that lasted only for a brief space of time.

He was dimly aware of the fact that strong arms were bearing him along in a particularly uncomfortable position. He felt himself rudely dumped upon the rough rock floor, and had a dreamy sense of still ruder hands tearing at the mask with which he so religiously kept his face hidden from even the most trusted of his followers.

And if Steele Slocum had not been interrupted just at that moment by the shot which so narrowly missed his life, he surely must have seen signs of rallying consciousness in that slight shiver, in the faint movement of head and arms.

Then came the alarm, closely following those shots, and among others who rushed to the scene, were John Edgar and his Mexican wife.

It was a scene of wildest confusion for a brief space. So many alarms had been given, so many strange events had happened, that even those of the band upon whose cool nerve and keen wits reliance might usually be placed, seemed all abroad just then.

Finding their chieftain down, with Ben Jeeters lying not far beyond with a ghastly wound in his breast, by no means lessened their confusion, and it is not so strange that more words than deeds filled those first few seconds.

During it all, Major Nightmare felt that rough hands were causing him more pain than relief, and when, a few minutes later, his wits rallied sufficiently for him to do a bit of thinking, one very disagreeable idea kept tormenting his brain.

"Somebody lifted my mask, surely! Who was it? Had they time to see? Why did they want to see, rather?"

He had no idea who could have assaulted him, unless it was Silky Steele; but how had he found his way back to that chamber? And if he was the author of that blow, why had he attempted to carry him, Major Nightmare, away? For—surely he had been so carried.

Then, he could not explain just why, his suspicions turned toward Carmen and her husband, and it was fully as much to avoid possible contact with them while his nerves were so unstrung, that the road-agent chieftain crept away to hiding, leaving his men to conduct the chase or search after their own judgment.

Solitary meditation is generally supposed to clear the brain and untangle riddles, but this instance proved to be an exception. Major Nightmare was only a few minutes in arriving himself out of the notion that Silky Steele was at the bottom of it all, and into the fancy that a husband's jealousy had kicked up the entire disturbance!

"She must have told him—to clear herself!" ran a portion of his argument. "And he—did he mean to down me for keeps, or just lay me

out long enough for a square look under my mask? Did he have time to make me out? Will he make use of that knowledge?"

Hardly, unless fate kept them apart for a time, judging from the vicious emphasis with which Major Nightmare gripped the haft of a knife, just then!

Long before he reached this conclusion, the outlaw captain had replaced his disarranged mask. This had not been entirely torn free from his face, thanks to the ingeniously contrived rubber bands, which had contracted the instant Steele Slocum broke his grip when that shot came from out the dark passage.

"I don't reckon many—if any—of the boys caught a glimpse of my mug, but—*somebody did!* And until I can give a square guess at who that somebody was, reckon I'd better feel my way!"

Major Nightmare was just on the point of leaving his retreat for the purpose of taking his first step in that "feeling" process, when he was intruded upon by one of the band, who hastily explained:

"I wanted—he's in a mighty bad way, I'm fearing, sir! Shot right through the midriff, and—"

"Who's shot? Not that cursed sport?"

"Ben Jeeters, sir. I reckon the sport downed him, for poor Ben keeps talking about—"

"Where is he? Take what you want—the chest is yonder—and show me where the fellow is. Lively, now!"

When Major Nightmare desired haste, in that tone of voice, his men cut precious little time to waste, and in barely a couple of minutes more, the outlaw chief was kneeling beside his wounded henchman.

It needed but a single glance to convince one so experienced in wild life, that the poor fellow was hard hit, even if his wound was not a fatal one. Nearly in the center of his broad chest the missile had struck him, passing entirely through his body.

"But you'll pull through, old man," cheerily declared the chief, though he was by no means so confident as his words implied. "And you will live to dance over the grave of the devil who shot you, too!"

"You know—I ketched him, over—he hed a match—"

"Who was it? You saw his face?" excitedly demanded his master.

"Yes. Silky—the same devil—"

"You are sure it was Silky Steele? He was alone? No one was with him? He had a match, you say? What was he doing with it?"

It took time before poor Ben Jeeters could answer all of these swiftly uttered questions, but Major Nightmare, for all his pretended sympathy, showed the wounded wretch no mercy, only giving over when he was fully satisfied that neither John Edgar nor Carmen Diaz had aught to do with that assault and mask-lifting.

Before this point was reached, however, the sounds of firing came rolling like muffled thunder through those gloomy passages, but even then Major Nightmare did not join in the man-hunt. Why should he own dogs, yet bark himself?

Then word was brought back that Silky Steele had not only escaped from the burrow, but had blocked the opening by a mass of rock which was too weighty for the few to move who could get at it in such contracted quarters.

Major Nightmare was too intensely angry for blustering oaths or fiery threats. In cold, even terms he bade his men set forth in chase, and to never give over until complete success rewarded their efforts.

"Follow and catch him. Take him alive if you can without running too much risk or too heavy loss. But—*find and take him!*"

There was nothing said of Peter Bell or Injun Molly, for the barricade had been completed before the search-party could gain the exit, and the fellow who had been flung endlong into the tunnel by Silky Steele had been knocked senseless by the fall. Later, he might have news of importance to communicate, for he surely must have seen or heard something before his overthrow, but that messenger of evil tidings had not waited for his recovery.

By the time his inquisition of poor Ben Jeeters had come to an end, Major Nightmare felt reasonably assured that neither John Edgar nor Carmen, his wife, had shared in his overthrow, though he was not yet entirely sure one or both had not caught at least a glimpse of, his unmasked face during that confusion.

Hoping to decide these doubts without exposing his own uneasiness, the outlaw quickly ascertained that the young cowboy had joined in the hunt for Silky Steele, and had not yet returned to his wife. And then, with a more definite end in view, Major Nightmare sought out that same wife, finding her alone with her thoughts.

Carmen shrunk away with a swift breath of repulsion and fear as that deep voice broke in upon her reverie and she recognized that masked shape; but then the caution enjoined by her husband caused her to rally, and cover her momentary slip by a feigned shiver of relief.

"I fancied 'twas that terrible assassin, señor!"

So much has happened—so many strange events—I am all unnerved!"

"Little marvel at that, señora," admitted the major, bowing over the hand which was resigned to his clasp with secret aversion. "But the audacious knave will not trouble us much longer. Your husband is of those who are in pursuit. Of course you cannot even dream of failure attending his efforts?"

"Juan will succeed if success is possible for any man, señor," was the quick, half-offended retort. "Even with you for a formidable competitor—"

"You would bet on your husband?" Major Nightmare completed her sentence, with a short, dry laugh. "Is the honeymoon not yet grown old, señora? I surely thought, from a word Edgar let drop, that you had been married for a year or two, at least!"

"Is that cause for affection growing cold, señor?"

"The vast majority of married people would say yes, if they told the naked truth, I'm thinking. But you—Is Edgar still so very dear to your heart, Carmen?"

"Juan is my husband, señor. He bowed with me before the holy father, and now—May I go, señor?"

"Have you so much of importance on hand that you can't spare even a few minutes to one whose most earnest thought is how to serve you—and your husband?"

"I do not comprehend, señor," hesitated Carmen, longing to flee, yet fearful of flying in the face of her husband's advice. "Will you kindly speak a little more plainly?"

For a brief space Major Nightmare was tempted to cast aside all disguise, and if he had obeyed that impulse, however his words might have affected Carmen Diaz, she certainly could not have doubted his meaning longer. But prudence restrained his tongue for the present, and he abruptly touched upon another point.

"For one thing, señora, I wished to talk with you about the villain you say you have been searching for so long: Basil Imroy, I think you called him?"

"And you will tell me?" with undisguised eagerness, her tightly clasped hands rising between them, only to be caught in his strong grasp. "Señor—"

"If I do tell you, Carmen, what will you do for me in return?"

"What can I do, señor? I will work for you! I will give you every peso I can earn, beg or borrow! I will serve you—Oh, señor! For love of the mother who bore you, tell me of my poor Rosina!"

"You loved her so dearly, then? You would be willing to sacrifice much, if by so doing you could learn her fate?"

"Have I not said as much?" asked Carmen, yet shrinking away from that glowing gaze, her hands trembling in his firm grasp.

"I knew a man called Basil Imroy, Carmen. He had a dark-eyed wife whom he called Rose. This was in my country, you understand, and here the name Rosina would sound too foreign for common use," explained the villain, his left hand securing hers, leaving his right arm free to slip about her waist.

"Señor, you forget!" panted Carmen, twisting away like an eel. "Juan—I have a husband, señor, and—"

"You had a sister, too, didn't you?" with a short, harsh laugh, but without renewing that attempt at an embrace. "If the Rose I knew should happen to be the Rosina you lost, would there be hope for me then, Carmencita?"

His meaning was beyond question, and Carmen did not even pretend to misinterpret it. Her lithe figure was drawn proudly erect, and her tones were almost icily cold as she said:

"I am a lawful wife, señor, and my husband still lives!"

"But—if he should die?"

"I would perish with him, señor!"

For a brief space there was silence between the two. This was not what Major Nightmare expected, by any means. He was prepared for a fiery outburst, similar to those he had witnessed from that same source before, but this proud, almost icy calm was something new to his experience, and he did not know just how to continue his assault.

Like all evil and treacherous men, he suspected a trap in every move which he could not fully solve, and once more those old doubts returned, doing more toward bluffing him off than the fiercest of threats could have done.

"You don't comprehend, señora," he said, curtly. "I'll see you again, when I've more time to spare for explanations."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MAJOR NIGHTMARE SCENTS TROUBLE AHEAD.

WHETHER this unexpected rebuff had aught to do with stirring him up to prompt action, is not so clear, but certain it is that Major Nightmare, immediately after parting with Carmen Diaz, looked to his weapons, and then hurried forth from the Robbers' Roost to join his men, who were out in quest of the Stay-in Sport.

Silky Steele had given them far too much trouble already. It was high time he was

"called down," and Major Nightmare did his level best to insure that desirable result by promising his men a rich reward in case they succeeded in bringing the dangerous gambler to his last account.

"We've got to do it, you understand!" was his grim addition. "He knows now where our retreat is located, even if he hasn't spotted the larger portion of our family. If he wins clear—well, you can figure up the result for yourselves!"

After that there was no "soldiering" among the searchers, but their reward was hardly in proportion to their exertions. The bare rocks had taken no trail, and there was nothing to point out the direction in which the Stay-in Sport had beaten retreat.

Granting that he knew to what quarter of that wild stretch of country he had been carried while drugged, it would be most natural for him to head direct for Camp Climax, and Major Nightmare sent a number of his men in that direction, with orders to slay, if they could not capture without too great risk to themselves.

Others were sent along possible trails, while still more were directed to scale the highest rocks to scan the lower regions, with signals prearranged in case they should be fortunate enough to sight the dangerous fugitive.

All this consumed time, as a matter of course, and it was in time that Major Nightmare felt the weakest, just then. The day was nearly spent, and should twilight come before Silky Steele was discovered, he would have an entire night under cover of which to make his escape good.

Edgar was one of the band whom the leader failed to assign a particular duty, not a little to the cowboy's surprise. He fully expected some such order, remembering his suspicions concerning the amorous eye with which Major Nightmare had been regarding Carmen. He was ready to risk an open quarrel rather than accept any such orders, but the fact that none such were given, caused him more uneasiness than relief.

"You cunning devil!" he mentally raged, though keeping his face perfectly schooled the while. "What dirty tricks are you hatching up now? If you've harmed Carmen, I'll tear your heart out, though a thousand of your imps were standing by!"

As the sun sunk out of sight, Major Nightmare ceased his vain search for a trail, and calling John Edgar, he turned to cross the range, as the only known (to him) method of reaching the Robbers' Roost.

"I'd give all the boodle I expect to gather during the next six months, just for one little minute, face to face, with that devil!" he said, in vicious tones.

"Of course there couldn't be any mistake!" hesitatingly asked the ex-cowboy. "It was the fellow called Silky Steele?"

"Who else could it have been?" sharply demanded the major, turning a keen glance upon his companion. "You didn't do it, of course?"

"Well, hardly!" with a light laugh at the bare idea. "I'm not so tearing sure you are just the best friend on earth to me and mine, out if the time ever comes for me to lift hand against you, I'll strike you in front—and strike to kill, not to stun!"

It was a bold speech, boldly spoken, and if their acquaintance had been of longer duration, possibly John Edgar would have thought twice before speaking once.

And yet, it really did him no harm.

Major Nightmare was a man who could appreciate daring in another, since he was far from being a physical coward himself. Then, too, this was not the speech nor the manner of a treacherous enemy, and from that moment he no longer thought of the ex-cowboy as his assailant.

"If you hold your hand until you know I'm your enemy, Edgar, you'll never strike at me, back or front. We ought to be firm friends and side-partners, instead, for we're both in the same box!"

"You mean as to this Silky Steele?"

"Of course. He must have been skulking around for hours, since he gave the boys the slip so neatly. Devil toast the fellow! I'd give a finger to know just how he turned the trick!"

"Then you reckon he saw me, plain enough to swear to my face?"

"If he saw you at all, he did that same! He's all devil, I'm thinking!"

John Edgar asked no further questions, and Major Nightmare seemed too mad for speech as he strode briskly along. Altogether it had been a most unprofitable day, and the least pleasant part of it all might be yet to come.

If Silky Steele had not been interrupted by Ben Jeeters before that match did its work, would he not try to play even for his capture, by denouncing the owner of that exposed face?

The main entrance was reached without event worthy of note, and as John Edgar hurried away in the direction of the quarters which had been fitted up for himself and wife, a peculiar glitter came into the eyes of the masked outlaw.

He permitted the ex-cowboy to go his way without uttering a word to check his steps, and lingered to give some instructions for the night to the two men on duty as guards, before passing on himself.

Once out of sight and hearing of the guards, Major Nightmare hastened his steps, tiptoeing along as silently as a veritable ghost, bent on learning what passed between husband and wife.

"Will she tell him? Yes, if she was sincere in her bluff, no, if she was only playing a part!"

To settle his doubts, Major Nightmare was not above playing eavesdropper, and even the possibility of hearing no good of himself failed to keep him from running that risk.

Thanks to his perfect knowledge of that portion of the Roost, he experienced but little difficulty in gaining a point from whence he could see and hear, then settled himself down to take notes.

Whatever doubts he might have entertained as to Carmen's perfect honesty in repulsing his efforts at love-making, fled right speedily, for even while he was gaining that place of espial, the Spanish woman was tearfully confiding all to her husband.

"Curse his impudence!" fumed the ex-cowboy, one hand dropping to his belt of arms, his face flushing hotly with indignation. "I'll bear with him no longer! I'll face him down before all his gang, and if he does not apologize—"

"No, no, my dear heart!" murmured Carmen, her arms flying around his neck, her red lips touching his between each sentence. "You must not! He would murder you! And then—I would die, too!"

"It would be better for you to die than to fall into his evil grip without a husband to stand between!" moodily said Edgar.

"Then, too, Juan, he surely knows of poor Rosina! He must tell—he must point how and where I can find my sister—or her grave!"

"I'm not so sure of that," slowly uttered her husband, and Major Nightmare fairly held his breath to catch what would follow. "I more than half-believe he was lying to you, just in hopes of winning—I can't say it!" with passionate fierceness. "I must forget, or I'll kill him on sight!"

Major Nightmare deemed he had heard enough for his future plans, and silently crept away, the quicker to set them in motion. His worst fears had proved unfounded, and if he played his cards well, he might still come out ahead of the game.

Beating a retreat until at a safe distance, he turned, to call out:

"I say, Edgar!"

"What's wanting?" promptly called back the ex-cowboy.

"You're there, are you? Good enough! I want to have a bit of a talk with you, if you've no serious objections."

The last word passed his lips just before he gained the entrance to that little recess in the rocks, but his delay was long enough for husband and wife to regain command of their features, and he was received much as usual, though Edgar's voice sounded cold as he said:

"You're master of all here, major, of course. What is it you want of me just now?"

"I come as a friend, not as a master, old man," briskly retorted the road-agent. "We're all in the same box, and if we're to get out with credit to ourselves, we've got to be up and doing."

"All of which means—just what?"

"You haven't forgotten what I hinted at while coming over the range, surely?"

"You mean about Silky Steele?"

"What else?" with an impatient gesture. "If you knew that demon one-half as well as I know him, you'd hardly take it so coolly!"

"Will getting hot under the collar do any good?"

"Maybe not, but working ought to! And the less time we waste in getting down to business, Edgar, the safer both your neck and mine will be! Tough, but true, as time will show you!"

"Even if the fellow saw us here, what can he do?"

"Set Camp Climax afire, and if that isn't enough, stir up the whole section against us! I tell you, man, Silky Steele is a mighty tough nut, and he'll be sure to strike back at us all! He has been here twice, at least; once as a captive, next of his own free will. Would he have run his head back into danger of that sort, without he meant something?"

"Maybe he couldn't get out any sooner, but—it's catching before hanging! We can pull out, and once started—"

"No, no!" cried Carmen, for the first time interfering, strong passion in face and voice. "I have sworn to find Hernando Bernal, and I will keep the oath I vowed at the feet of the Holy Virgin! I feel that he is near here! I feel that Mary, Mother, will bring us face to face, that I may avenge the terrible wrongs my poor Rosina had to suffer!"

"If the man you call Bernal is the one you feared ought to be called Basil Imroy—"

"'Twas on the card I gave you, señor!"

"I know. Well, I used to know a Basil

Imroy, and he had a wife named Rose. If the two men are one and the same, you have wronged him, in part at least, for she was his legal wife."

"Tell me—she still lives?"

"She was alive when I last heard from them, and I have faith she is living still. If you will promise me to—"

"You are speaking to my wife, remember, Major Nightmare!"

"Why should I forget that delightful fact, Edgar?" half sneered the outlaw. "Because I tried a clumsy jest once, do you think I can't be in sober earnest? Bah! don't be a fool, man! This is business."

"Help for help is good enough for a king, especially when you're helping your own neck out of a noose! And so—down, this cursed sport, and then I'll rake up the past until you can't rest!"

"What is it you wish me to do, then?"

"First, to fully understand the situation. It was a nasty mistake, picking up the sport, but that can't be helped now. The facts run like this: He was brought here. He saw Carmen, your wife, with her fair face as it shows now. She was with me, an admitted outlaw. So much for her!"

"He broke away, but he came back, after prowling about for hours. He almost certainly saw you, with bare face, going around without bonds, and fully armed. He may even have been near enough at hand to see and hear you while we were talking together, since he afterward took me by surprise in that selfsame spot! Do you begin to see what I'm driving at, partner?"

"You think he has marked me as one of the gang?"

"Worse than that! Remember that it was mainly through his getting into trouble with your wife that he was picked up, in the first place. He was treated pretty roughly, afterward. He has seen her face, to a certainty, and yours in all probability. He has every reason to think you both part of the family."

"He has seen me, but always masked, and he couldn't tell me from his own brother though we were to meet face to face. He's a genuine sport, and will play to get even. Now—just how will he strike?"

"By swearing that you two are head moguls of this outfit! That you are Major Nightmare, and Carmen your next in command!"

CHAPTER XIX.

CRACKED BELL'S BONANZA.

THANKS to their prompt and united action, that heavy mass of rock toppled over and closed the exit, before the guard could rally, or his mates from the other side of the hollowed hill could come up in their excited rush.

"Thank you later, friends!" muttered Steele Slocum, speaking to both, but with a glance only for one of his timely assistants, springing back to where the wounded outlaw was writhing in his agony.

A single jerk removed his belt of weapons, and another deft movement twisted about his eyes the "k" which he wore loosely knotted about his neck, in true cowboy fashion.

At the same time the Stay-in Sport made a gesture to the two pair of eyes which were watching his actions, and instantly divining his meaning, Injun Molly and Peter Bell hastened away out of sight among the rocks.

"He's too badly hurt to give us much thought I reckon," Silky explained, after rejoining his friends, a few moments later. "Still, he might have raised a row with his guns, and even have recognized you two sufficiently to—*The devil!*"

"Arrow—dat tell!" quietly spoke Injun Molly, readily interpreting the full import of that mortified start.

"That comes of losing—one more crow to pick with you, major!"

Whipping forth his knife, Silky Steele ran back to the spot where the wounded wretch lay, paying no heed to his faint cry for mercy at sight of that gleaming blade, giving no thought to the smothered oaths and muffled thumpings coming from the other side of that overturned bowler.

Instead of slaying the helpless outlaw, Silky Steele simply severed the arrow, pulling back the feathered end, even as his other hand caught the still damp barb.

"Save your breath for hanging on to life, Johnny!" he grimly uttered by way of warning, then sprang swiftly away to rejoin his recently-found friends.

Although it was pretty clear that the road-agents could not make their exit without calling more force into play than their naked hands, each one of the trio knew well enough that they were still in peril of no ordinary degree. There was no certainty that the squad of outlaws whom they had avoided by so promptly seeking refuge in the other passage, had returned over the ridge to the main cavern. Then, too, there was the smaller bunch with whom they had interchanged shots; they might be forming yet another ambushade!

"Don't you reckon we'd better hunt the same old hole, and lie low for dark to cover our

movements, Peter?" suggested Slocum; but before Cracked Bell could make reply, Injun Molly spoke out:

"No. Git 'way now—bes' keep 'way!"

"All right, and that settles it!" cheerily assented the gambler, seemingly more than ready to resign the lead into other hands, even though those hands belonged to an Indian squaw. "You do the piloting, Molly, and we'll do the case-keeping!"

Peter Bell said never a word, though his face wore a gloomy, despondent expression which had become well nigh habitual with him, thanks to long years of sorrow, trial and bitter disappointment.

Molly led the way in silence, and even while keeping his eyes on the keen alert for signs of danger, Silky Steele could but admire her skill and prompt intuition. Not a step was uselessly taken, and every point of cover was utilized to the best advantage.

Thus it came about that, when the temporarily demoralized road-agents fairly fell to work in the outer air, the fugitives were far beyond range of either gun or eye, thanks to the broken, rugged nature of that tract.

When Steele Slocum felt fully assured of that fact, he came to a halt, with a word which caused both Molly and Peter to imitate his example.

"I reckon this is about as good a place as any, in which to fight it out, Peter. Now—which way next?"

"I don't—I can't see what you mean!" stammered Cracked Bell.

"Well, I'm leaving all to you. I reckon you know where we are, and where you'll be tolerably safe from thoseimps. I'm all at sea, but that don't count. It's not my style to crowd into a private game, and unless you're perfectly willing, good-by!"

Peter Bell hesitated, but Injun Molly caught him by an arm, drawing him to one side, whispering rapidly in his ear. Then Peter turned toward the sport, almost sulkily mumbling:

"Ef you'll come 'long 'ith us, stranger, I reckon thar'll be found room enough fer all on us!"

It was an ungracious invitation, and Cracked Bell plainly hoped it might be declined. Possibly that had something to do with Slocum's prompt acceptance, for there was a half-malicious twinkle in his gray eyes as he said:

"All right, Peter, since you insist so warmly, I'll be your guest, at least long enough to get this plaguey mist cleared out of my eyes. As it is, I'd hate to take oath I'm not in Africa or Asia!"

Was Injun Molly smiling? The Stay-in Sport fancied so, but before he could make sure, she was leading the way at as rapid a pace as the nature of the ground would permit.

There was no interchange of speech for some time. The route was a difficult one, mainly through and over bare rocks, where nothing less weighty than the shod hoofs of a horse would have left a trail sufficiently plain for the keenest of eyes to lift. The day was fading, and twilight would soon be upon them.

Then, too, Silky Steele was growing both weary and sleepy, to say nothing of an empty stomach; about the most disagreeable traveling companion mortal man can have attached to his person!

He had no idea how much further the refuge for which Injun Molly was heading lay, but he was too much a man to utter a complaint while one of the reputed weaker sex held out, and he doggedly plodded on in grim silence.

Matters took a turn for the worse rather than the better, when the woman, with a flash over a shoulder, turned sharply to the left, to enter a shallow but swiftly-flowing stream.

Peter Bell imitated her example as though it was a matter of course, and the gambler barely hesitated on the brink. Then, for the first time, he felt thankful for those big clumsy boots which Jeeters had so unwittingly supplied him with.

Though the cold struck through the thick leather with an icy chill, the patent leathers which he had lost when stripped and "put to bed," by Major Nightmare's orders would have served him far less well.

For fully half a mile Injun Molly led the way down that stream, now in water barely to their ankles, then passing through the edge of gently circling pools where one's knees felt that icy touch, and where hungry trout were rising to feed without a fear of those passing forms.

Presently they came to where the stream curved under a shelving cliff, eddying into and then out of a not very extensive cavern, resembling the rude lean-to which a camper knocks up for a single night's occupation in the woods.

That was all Silky Steele could make out of it by the fading light, and he felt a thrill of disgusted surprise when Injun Molly, keeping near one edge of the pool, passed inside that forbidding place.

"You surely don't intend to stop here?" faintly expostulated Slocum.

"Nobody's 'bleedin' of ye to come, stranger!" grunted Cracked Bell, at the same time following the woman. "This happens to be our way, though, an' we're gwine on furder."

"To Grubville, I'm hoping, though you

needn't take that as a hint—unless you're kind enough!"

Injun Molly touched his hand, giving him a start in the dark.

"Come—'most dere now!" she whispered, as their fingers closed upon each other.

Whether Injun Molly felt anything of the sort is not positively known, but certain it is that Steele Slocum experienced something very much like an electric shock at that contact: mild, yet exhilarating.

And from that moment he implicitly obeyed his guide, moving as she moved, doing as she did: but *his* hand did nearly if not quite all of the silent telegraphy!

A whisper from Molly's lips caused Steele to bend low, his face nearly coming in contact with the water at the further extremity of that natural lean-to. He scraped his bare head against the rock as he passed on after his guide, feeling the cold water pushing against his bended knees as he advanced awkwardly, until—

"Dat past. Now—can stand up, if like!"

All was darkness the most intense around them. They were still in particularly cold water. Thanks to his awkward stooping to pass an obstacle which he had met for the first time, Silky Steele was more than damp to his waste! Yet he neither grumbled nor cursed. True, it was only Injun Molly, but—was she not of the gentler sex?

Her firm, steady grasp on his cold fingers guided the Stay-in Sport on through the darkness. Only a few paces more were taken in the cold stream, though its low murmur was distinctly audible, and Silky Steele began to realize part of the truth: that this was a second brook, which united with the first under cover of that innocent-seeming eddy, and it was growing easier for him to comprehend how Peter Bell had for so long kept sacred the secret of his golden bonanza.

A few moments of this travel brought them to an abrupt curve, passing which Silky Steele caught a glimpse of twilight not far ahead. And then they emerged from that damp passage, into a small but veritable oasis of peace and seeming safety.

"Dis all—home, now!" said Injun Molly, dropping his hand, then hastening on ahead, like one on hospitable cares intent.

Silky Steele cast one keen, comprehensive glance around him, then assumed an indifference he was far from feeling. For that single look convinced him beyond a doubt that he now stood within Cracked Bell's Bonanza!

On nearly every side showed signs which one familiar with the mining region could not mistake. On all sides the "pan miner" had been at work, the growing vegetation only thinly disguising his rude touch.

"Well, why don't you say something?" sharply demanded Peter Bell, as the Stay-in Sport slowly yawned, with wide-stretching arms. "What do you think of it all, stranger?"

"Nothing. You saved my life, back yonder, when those devils had me foul. You've treated me as a friend, and I'll play you white in return. I can see nothing more than you bid me take in, and even that little will never be carried away with me when I leave."

He spoke quietly, but with an emphasis such as only an honest man can give the right ring. He faced Cracked Bell as he spoke, but with a short bitter laugh, the mountain vagabond flung up a clinched hand.

CHAPTER XX.

SILKY STEELE'S MASCOT.

NOT to strike, though the gambler might very well have been forgiven for thinking such was his intention. A fierce gesture, then the old man spoke again.

"Bah! Are you so much better than any other who claims to be a white man? Surely, 'tis not a crime to cheat a lunatic and an Indian squaw!"

"Even that goes, if you wish it that way, Peter," quietly said the gambler, a faint smile creeping into his face as he squarely met that almost savage gaze.

The old man recoiled involuntarily, his clinched hand opening, his eyes taking on an almost frightened expression as he stammered:

"What—I don't— What you mean, sir?"

"Do you really want an honest answer, Peter Bell?"

The vagabond drew back a pace further, but as Silky Steele kept his station, his arms easily folding themselves, that dying light showing nothing worse or more terrible than a pleasant smile upon his face, the other rallied in part, faltering:

"If you— Honest, of course!"

"All right, Peter. I mean just this: *you* are not crazy, and *she* is no more an Indian than I am this instant!"

Perhaps it was fortunate for all concerned that, just then, the voice of Injun Molly was heard, calling to Peter Bell.

Silky Steele stepped aside, and the old man passed him by with far from steady footsteps, instinctively yielding obedience to her on whom he had learned to lean through all his trials and bitter disappointments.

Slocum followed after, with slower steps,

hardly convinced that he had acted wisely in thus bluntly betraying the suspicions which had been growing stronger almost from the hour in which he had been so bravely confronted by Injun Molly, when his pistol threatened the life of her reputed husband.

Until that meeting he, in company with so many others who had paid only passing notice to that silent couple, had taken it for granted that they were just what they appeared on the surface. Such an alliance was far from uncommon along the border, and he who took a squaw for wife was hardly fastidious on the score of age, just so the woman was able to do the drudgery which, as a matter of course, fell to her lot in life, whether allied with white man or red-skin.

But, ever since that meeting, while in her company, and sometimes when apart from Indian Molly, Silky Steele had been using his reasoning powers, and this recent declaration was a summing up of his thoughts.

"Maybe I've made a fool play, but—they can't accuse me of playing 'em dirt, anyway!" was his inward consolation, as he followed Peter Bell far enough to catch a glimpse of Injun Molly, already busied with preparing supper.

That gave his thoughts a more agreeable turn, and dropping down on a grateful clump of grass, Steele Slocum awaited that most welcome summons to supper.

Though plain, food was in abundance, and the trio ate with a hearty relish. Even Peter Bell, though his face still wore a darkly troubled expression, did ample justice to Molly's cookery. And she, though drawing apart from the men, ate at the same time, thus giving Slocum one more proof that he had not been far wrong in his guess as to her being other than a pure-blooded Indian squaw.

He made no remark, however. For the present he was quite willing to let that point rest in abeyance, unless brought up by Cracked Bell himself. If that occurred, he would play his cards in accordance.

When their hunger was satiated for the time being, Injun Molly brought tobacco-filled pipes for each of the men, and deftly dropped a living coal on top of each bowl. Then, before Slocum could shape his thanks for her thoughtfulness, she turned away, to bear the dishes into the nearly invisible hut which nestled beneath three wide-topped trees.

The meal had been prepared and eaten out of doors, for the night was pleasant, and the fire-glow afforded ample light for all purposes; but the rest Molly apparently preferred to look after in seclusion.

Silky Steele more than half suspected that Peter Bell had given the young woman a hint concerning his words of a short time before, and as he half reclined before that fire, placidly puffing away, he was deciding on his proper course of procedure.

"Well, Peter," he said, at length, gazing into the fire, feeling that his unwilling host would be more at his ease if not too closely regarded. "You've treated me mighty white, for a perfect stranger, and as I haven't any other coin in which to pay for supper and lodging, I reckon it wouldn't be such a bad idea were I to let you know something about the fellow you've taken in?"

"I don't ax it of ye, stranger," muttered Cracked Bell, moodily.

"If you had, maybe I wouldn't be quite so willing to tell," with a low, soft chuckle. "But—here it comes, pardner!"

"My name is really Steele Slocum, for, rough as I may have lived, I've contrived to pull through so far without doing aught to force a change of cognomens. I'm not bragging, but still that's worth mentioning, out in this ruff-skuff region, where false names are lying around on every bush!"

"I had a mother—once! She lived an angel here on earth, and I know she's an angel—*up yonder!*" with a reverential glance toward the now star-studded vault of heaven. "If she had lived longer, I might have grown up a better boy, and made a better man. But—she passed over, and then I had—only father!"

"Not that he was *all* bad; if he had been, he could never have won such a pure woman for a wife; but he came of a race of gamblers, and I reckon he passed a bit of the bad blood on to his only son!"

"Anyway, I knew how to gamble almost before I knew how to read! And before I could show a beard, I was making my own way in the world as a sport in general, and a card-sharp in particular."

"In the course of time I drifted West, as all of my class are sure to do, even if crimes nearer the rising sun do not hasten their drift! I came to make money, however, not to cheat justice."

"Why do I tell you all this? Well, partly to show you that I am not afraid to trust you with my past, but more to convince you that I was in sober earnest, back yonder, when I spoke to you about the mascot I had been robbed of."

"Did I say you was lyin'?" mumbled Cracked Bell.

"Not in words, though your eyes came

mighty nigh doing so!" with a low, mellow chuckle, as he shifted himself to an easier position. "But I'm not blaming you. If I didn't know 'twas Gospel truth, I'd choke at swallowing such a dose, my own self! But—let me go on, Peter, please!"

"Just one little instance of how my mascot served me: that was when I needed a lump sum of money, and needed it mighty bad, too! And I was playing poker with three thoroughbred sports, each with a boodle that counted dollars where my pile showed up pennies!"

"We were playing jack-pots, and it had passed nearly a dozen times, which means there was a hatful in the center. One of the sports opened at last. I had but a pair of deuces, but I couldn't afford to stay out. I drew three cards, but I never caught a minnow!"

"All of the rest stayed in, and each one raised in turn. I asked my mascot what to do, and it said *stay in!* I followed suit. Twice more it went around, each time calling for the limit. That drove out all but one of the sports, and he came back at me. I raised again, for my mascot told me I was striking the right tune. He answered, and that left me just enough to call. I did so. He had drawn only a single card, but he threw up his hand without a word. I never knew what he was bluffing on, for I didn't care to make him show down. My pair of deuces filled my pockets that night, and *my mascot did it all!*"

"I'd call it pure luck, rather!"

"All right. I'm not forcing you to my side, Peter. Only—was it pure luck that made my mascot bid me chip in on your side, this morning, when all those roughs were after your gore?"

"Did it do that?" with a start of interest.

"You bet it just *did!* And only for *that* hint, I'd have thought you as guilty as any of the rest, for that marked arrow was damning proof, you must confess, Peter!"

"She never shot him! He was working for us, and all our hopes were placed on that man! He swore that Basil Imroy was somewhere in this region, and if I could only find him—but now—all's lost!"

In his gloomy despair, Peter Bell did not note how Silky Steele started at mention of that name, nor how one hand flew toward the pocket where nestled a bit of pasteboard on which that same name was written. Truly, it was a strange coincidence, and so Steele Slocum regarded it.

"Peter, do you know what I begin to believe?" the sport said, slowly. "That Sandy McIntosh came to his death by the hand of one who hoped to cast strong suspicion upon you two, and then make your bonanza the price of saving your necks from the rope of the lynchers!"

It was Peter's turn to give a start of surprise, and he stared into that deeply-interested face, half-incredulously half-suspiciously.

"How did you guess that? Were you playing in with the judge?"

"Not if he meant you any mischief, Peter. Did he?"

For answer, Cracked Bell gave a hasty account of how Aaron Ramsey endeavored to extort their secret as the price of his protection. The Stay-in Sport listened with grim interest, then spoke deliberately:

"Peter, the death of poor Sandy lies between two men: Judge Aaron Ramsey and Major Nightmare!"

"Why the major? Who is he? What do you know of him?"

"A mighty sight more than I ever dreamed of last night!" with a low chuckle as one hand raised to his shorn chin. "Then I knew him only as all honest men in and about Camp Climax knew him: that he was a thief and a robber, with a spice of devil thrown in to make it more binding. Now— Well, I'll know him again if ever I'm lucky enough to catch sight of his unmasked face!"

"But what makes you reckon he may be the one who butchered Sandy?"

"Wait, and I'll tell you, Peter. But, first let me tell you what sort of experience I had after leaving you and Molly and before you came up just in time to save my bacon."

Silky Steele gave a plain account of his adventures while scouting underground, speaking of Carmen and her quest, but as yet without mentioning the name written upon that card.

"Do you know, Peter, I have more than a strong suspicion that Major Nightmare is actually the fellow she was seeking! I tumbled to it first when he read that name on the card she gave him, and—"

"What name was that?" asked Bell, seemingly startled by an unconscious change in Slocum's voice.

"Here is the card, and it reads Basil Imroy, whom—"

"Devil!" screamed the old man, springing to his feet, only to grip his throat with both hands, then fall like a dead man!

CHAPTER XXI.

PLANNING A PITFALL.

ALTHOUGH they ought to have been prepared for something out of the common, both Carmen and John Edgar were taken aback by that.

pointed speech, and if Major Nightmare wished to produce a sensation, he surely had grounds for gratulation.

"Are you crazy, man?" ejaculated the ex-cowboy, hardly knowing just what words they were that leaped to his lips.

"Not to my knowledge, dear fellow. But you will be worse than insane if you refuse to take a cool, reasonable look at the picture I am trying to draw for you: a bit from Nature, bear in mind!"

"But—we are your prisoners, not your allies!"

"As a blind man might see!" sneered the outlaw, with a flash of his dark eyes over the belt of arms which encircled Edgar's waist. "It's a characteristic of such an innocent family as the Bad Dreams, to arm their captives and let them parade at will!"

Husband and wife interchanged glances. Both seemed troubled, but Carmen still had a look of resolution in her pale face: even yet she clung to the frail chance of learning something concerning the fate of the sister she had promised their dying mother to seek and find, if not in life, then in her grave.

"Wait, Juan," she murmured, yet loud enough for those other ears to divine her meaning. "Not yet must we break with our friend! There is something more lying beyond. Wait—and be loyal!"

"Good advice, Edgar, though an interested party tells you so," Major Nightmare commented with an approving nod that caused his blonde beard to flutter. "There is something more: your decision as to whether you prefer trapping to being trapped!"

"The first, of course, but—I'll know better what you mean if you'll put it into just so many words, major."

"I thought I had spoken out pretty plainly, but wind is cheap, and there's nothing equal to a clear understanding in matters like this. Now then—prick up your ears, Johnny!"

"You've lived long enough to have some idea of what a thoroughbred card-sharp is like: a man who always plays to win, and who will gain his ends by trickery, if fair means fail him. You follow me, Johnny?"

"Easily enough. Your card-sharp is Silky Steele?"

"Sure! Born and bred a gambler, he's improved the pattern by steady practice, until now—I'd rather buck against any two other men in all the U. S., than face Steele Slocum with a heavy stake lying between us! And just now—well, you're the best judge of how valuable your portion of the stake is, Edgar!"

"You mean her—our lives?"

"You've hit it to a miracle, Johnny!" with one of his dry, disagreeable chuckles. "Though it seemed to stick in your throat, you'll have to gulp it down at last, for it's either down or be downed, now! And as a good friend, I'm willing to show you just how you can play roots on this slippery rascal!"

"Entirely disinterested, of course!"

"Don't try the sarcastic, Johnny, for it isn't at all in your line. Of course I mean to do my share of the job, but you have nothing to do with that part of the programme. And, as I said before, it's the danger menacing you and yours that calls for such prompt action. As for me, Silky Steele only knows me now as he has known me all along: as Major Nightmare, a dream, a phantom of the dark, a mere title, if not simply a figment of an unhealthy imagination!"

"Yet he has both seen and spoken with you, to say nothing of feeling your grip!"

"That's where the card-sharpener will show up, my dear fellow! Silky will ache to play even, but how can he get there? If the real Major Nightmare declines to show up as his antagonist, how can he work the rifle? By doing the next best thing, and calling knave the king, for his ace—see?"

"I see your drift, but—how will that be getting even with you?"

"What's the odds, so long as a fellow wins? He gets stakes and credit, all the same! Then, too, if you should buy your life by selling to him the real Major Nightmare, what easier than to call it all a brilliant stroke of cunning diplomacy?"

With all this glib talk, through which ran a current of more than half mockery, John Edgar knew that there was no little truth. He could readily recognize the peril which menaced Carmen—to do him common justice, he gave slight thought to his own danger—unless that escaped sport was beaten with his own weapons.

He turned toward his wife, with a half-pleading look, but Carmen frowned as she shook her head in negation.

Even love was powerless to turn her aside from the line she had marked out for her feet.

"Señora Carmen is right, Edgar," seriously said Major Nightmare, as his keen eyes took note of those glances. "She knows that Silky Steele has her marked in his black book: didn't she do her level best to ventilate his blood-pumper? Wasn't it mainly through her that he was picked up by my Dreams? Bad luck to their blunder, say I!"

"It may be that he didn't get your face down, Edgar, but if you stick to your woman, as of

course you will, won't he class you in the same list?"

"If I give him time!"

"Now you're getting down to hard-pan, Edgar! That's the very point I've been trying to get into your wits, man! You've got to strike the first blow, or you'll lack wind for striking at all! The men of this region are terrible fond of seeing a poor devil dance on nothing!"

"You have a plan of some sort: what is it?"

John Edgar asked that question in anything but a cheery mood. It was not from choice that he associated with such an unmitigated knave as Major Nightmare, and under more favorable circumstances he would have been what the world deems an honest, reputable citizen.

"A straight thrust that can fail only through your own cowardice, Edgar! A trick that will not only save your wife and yourself, but one that will down Silky Steele for keeps! Let me explain it in full."

"Major Nightmare stole your wife, holding her for ransom, knowing that her husband was a wealthy rancher down near the Grande. You could pay the sum demanded and never miss it, but your proud sense of honor and justice revolted. You swore to play even with the dastardly ravisher, and boldly taking your life in your hand, you followed the trail of conjugal love. See?"

"I see that you are steering mighty nigh a snag, major," coldly cautioned the ex-cowboy, his eyes aglow. "If you're in earnest, don't mix matters by turning it into a disagreeable jest."

"Oh, you're too mighty particular, man!" harshly retorted the outlaw; but when he resumed, his manner had undergone a change for the better. "Well, as I was saying, you played to get even. You *did* get even, so far as rescuing your wife was concerned, and now you want to put the cap-sheaf on. You can swear to the identity of Major Nightmare, and your wife can back up your word, for you both saw him without his mask."

"You mean for us to swear Silky Steele is Major Nightmare?"

"Of course; he is, isn't he?"

"Yes!" boldly cried Carmen, but Edgar still hung in the wind.

"Would such a charge be believed in Camp Climax?" he asked, doubtfully, trying to read the truth in those dark eyes the while.

"If told to the right persons first, it surely would!" declared Major Nightmare. "Judge Aaron Ramsey—any one can direct you to him, for he's pretty nigh the king-pin of Climax—will not only believe all you say against Steele Slocum, but he will help you down the sport, with a right hearty good will!"

"You can vouch for the judge, then, major?" asked Edgar, a very natural suspicion flashing across his brain at those confident words.

"To that extent I can, but you're flying off on the wrong trail, old man. Ramsey is not one of my family, and he would go a long ways to see a rope noosed about my neck! Still, he isn't over head and ears in love with Silky Steele, and so will just jump at the chance to hang him as the notorious outlaw and road-agent; see?"

"I hear you, major."

"Mark it down for use, then. Judge Aaron Ramsey is your first mark, and he will introduce you to others. Then, if there should be any dirty work to be turned over, hunt up a fellow named Briggs Oliphant. He's better known, perhaps, by the title of Big Elephant. Just give him a grip of the hand like this," illustrating his meaning until Edgar was letter-perfect, "and he'll do whatever you bid him, blindly and well."

"It all sounds smooth enough," hesitated Edgar, "but—I'd feel a good bit more confidence in the outcome if this Judge Ramsey was really an ally of yours. You said he was not, I think?"

Major Nightmare hesitated briefly, like one in doubt what reply to make, but when he did speak, it was decisively enough:

"He is not one of us, but that needn't uneasy you a mite, Edgar. He never did love Slocum, and if you give him a side hint that the sport is reaching out after Peter Bell, with a hungry eye on his bonanza, old Aaron will just spread himself wide open to send Silky up a tree!"

Carmen had listened to this interchange of question and answer with poorly concealed impatience. She hardly knew what physical fear meant, and, woman-like, she felt that even the lawless would respect her denial of wrong. And so, with that inherited thirst for vengeance running riot in her veins, she could no longer remain in the background.

"If we serve you thus, señor, will you keep your word and tell me all? My sister—"

"Shall have full justice done to her, never fear, señora," rather curtly interrupted the road-agent, then turning again upon Edgar, to ask:

"Well, sir, what think you of my little scheme for forestalling our impertinent caller, Steele Slocum?"

"The trick might work, but— isn't it rather rough on the sport?"

Major Nightmare broke into a harsh, sneering laugh at that query.

"It's you or him, Johnny, so take your choice! The man who tells the first story will stand the best show for belief. If you dally along until Silky Steele has smoothed over his own trail, I reckon you'll find this section something like Jordan: a mighty hard road to travel! That is, if you don't leave it by climbing a tree—at the end of a rope!"

"Don't sling in quite so many hints of that sort, major," coolly retorted the ex-cowboy. "You take a great deal of pains to mark out a path for our feet to follow, but you say nothing concerning your own movements. They will be—what?"

"Oh, as for me, I've very important business to look after in an exactly opposite direction! Sorry, but—you understand?"

"You fancy this den grows sultry, and bad for your health?"

"Something like it, yes! But you will follow my advice?"

"And Hernando Bernal, señor?"

"Go to Camp Climax and wait. I swear you shall meet him there!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A WOMAN'S BEST WEAPON.

THAT positive declaration turned the scale, so far as Carmen Diaz was concerned, and she gave assent to the wishes of Major Nightmare, for her husband as well as for herself.

If John Edgar was not entirely satisfied with the programme mapped out for them by the chief of the road-agents, he was too wise a Benedict to say so, then and there, reserving his opinion for a more favorable opportunity.

Then, too, would it be wise to speak exactly what he thought?

They were wholly at the mercy of Major Nightmare, despite the belt of arms which he had permitted Edgar to retain. At a word from his lips, death would swoop down upon both man and woman. Unless—and that fear did more than all else to subdue the ex-cowboy—Carmen should be reserved for a still worse fate!

Major Nightmare could hardly have escaped noticing that evident repugnance, but he was a close reasoner, and he knew pretty well what a strong influence Carmen exerted over her husband. In her fierce longing for the knowledge she believed he held, she would almost certainly hold Edgar true to that extorted pledge.

Even should he prove false to that agreement, what harm could his defection do? He could not name the real Major Nightmare, and Silky Steele could not be argued out of a belief in what his own eyes had shown him: Carmen Diaz, on terms of amity with the outlaw!

"If you should change your mind, Johnny, and try to run away instead of going to Camp Climax, you'd only have two hard men hunting you up," was his grim warning, before settling the final arrangements.

Those were hastened as much as might be. It was already night, and no time was to be wasted if Silky Steele was to be circumvented. True, he was afoot, and the road-agents were still searching for him, while Major Nightmare proposed to send off his semi-captives on horseback; but with so much at stake, they could not afford to throw away a single chance that might be saved.

"You will not fail of your oath, señor?" Carmen asked the road-agent, half-menacingly, just before husband and wife left that underground refuge for the last time.

"Have I not promised, señora?"

"Yes! and your pledge must be made good! If not—see!" and the hot-blooded Spaniard gave him a glimpse of her knife.

"Keep your steel for your enemies, Carmen," Major Nightmare laughed, then adding in a swift whisper: "If I ever falter in your service, you carry the means of insuring my fidelity: one touch of those ripe lips would send me to Hades in search of Basil Imroy!"

He gave her no chance for retort or reproof, but turned away, to quicken the movements of John Edgar, who was completing his final arrangements for that long night's ride.

Not to make the story of a daring rescue too difficult of belief, it was decided best for man and wife to depart with but a single horse between them, and that the one which the ex-cowboy had been riding when captured by the road-agents.

"So loving a husband would hardly think of more than his wife's comfort, after her safety was secured," Major Nightmare half-mockingly explained. "If he took time and run added risk simply to steal a second horse, people might take a second thought; and when once doubts begin, who can say where they will end?"

The valuables which had been taken from the couple when they were "held up," were all returned to them, and Major Nightmare voluntarily added a generous sum of money, cutting short all thanks with the blunt explanation:

"I'm chipping in my share, simply to make our little game easier to play. You'll find hard cash a mighty handy thing to have while stir-

ring up the citizens against Major Nightmare, alias Silky Steele!"

In addition to this, the road-agent bore the couple company until they were safely past the guards stationed before dark along the main trail to Camp Climax, in hopes of cutting off Silky Steele in case he should turn his steps that way.

"You'll find it plain sailing from this clear to Climax, I reckon, friends," he said, as he called a halt after passing that outpost. "For your own sake, quite as much as for mine, I bid you do your work without delay, or faltering. You have a hard man to buck against in Steele Slocum, but you'll find a willing and an able backer in Aaron Ramsey. With him once won over—and I assure you that he'll be more than ready to believe all evil of the sport, if you only make him understand that Silky, as Major Nightmare, is playing for Cracked Bell's bonanza—you can carry the camp at your heels, like a mice!"

"And Rosina, señor! You will come? You will tell me all? You will show me where to seek for that accursed Hernando Bernal?"

"I will keep my word, just as surely as you two keep the pledge you have given me," quickly responded the road-agent. "Now go, and good luck keep you company!"

John Edgar was only too willing to get rid of such unwelcome company, and sent their horse on at a brisk trot, until the road-agent chief was lost sight of altogether. Then he drew rein, his impatience seeming to subside.

Carmen was more eager by far, and the constant tapping of her heel against the flanks of the doubly-laden horse, kept Edgar with tight rein in order to maintain the pace which appeared to suit his fancy best, just then.

It need hardly be said that he was far from relishing the duty which was thus forced upon him. Not that he had any particular love for Silky Steele. To the contrary, he felt a grudge against that gentleman, such as can best be settled over a barrel of a loaded and leveled revolver, at short range.

Only for the card-sharp, this ugly emergency would never have arisen, he gloomily told himself, forgetful of the fact that through this very complication they both owed their freedom from captivity.

Still, that had been far less irksome than might be thought, barring the one ugly fact of Major Nightmare's amorous tendency.

They had been quietly riding along the trail to Camp Climax, when they were "rounded up" by a little squad of Bad Dreams, lacking more profitable game. They had been conducted to the Robbers' Roost, and there Carmen had been recognized by one of the road-agents as the daughter of a dead compatriot, and through his good offices, their restraint had been only nominal.

As Major Nightmare began to show a decided interest in the dark but beautiful Spanish woman, Carmen confided to him the story of her vengeful quest, and, later, told the same story to Benito Juarez. It was this last-named worthy who set her on the track of Silky Steele, whom he declared faithfully answered to her description of Hernando Bernal, and through his connivance, Carmen, in masculine disguise, stole away from the Robbers' Roost, bent on vengeance.

Even her husband was in ignorance of her purpose, since he was absent on a brief expedition in an opposite direction, and the road-agent left in command during the absence of Major Nightmare, learning of her venture, and fearing punishment for his negligence, at once took a squad of men and hastened to recapture the woman.

Thus it came about that both Carmen and Steele Slocum were brought to the underground retreat.

"Faster, Juan!" impatiently cried Carmen, finding her heel-practice effectually baffled. "Art thou losing thyself in slumber, dear heart?"

"We're riding too fast as it is, Carmencita," gloomily said Edgar, reining in outright. "Let me head another way, and I'll run the legs of this brute off to his knees!"

"We have promised, Juan. There is but one way for us. Onward!"

"Why should we swear away an innocent man's life, Carmen, when we can save ourselves by simply taking another route? What harm has he ever done to us? Why should we play cat to that devil's monkey? Would Major Nightmare do the same for us?"

"He has sworn—"

"To a lie, I've hardly the ghost of a doubt."

"He has sworn to tell me where I may find the vile assassin of my sister! He has sworn—No more, Juan Edgardo! Even though I have to go alone, without thee, I go to this town!"

Just as many another husband has and will continue doing, the ex-cowboy yielded against his better judgment, and once more they were riding toward Camp Climax. But he had not yet given over all hope of bringing his wife to see reason, through his eyes, and presently he spoke:

"Carmencita, is it not just a little odd that this fellow who goes by the title of Major

Nightmare, should seem to know so much about your private affairs? That he should claim to have known a man by the unusual name of Basil Imroy, who also had a wife whom he called Rose?"

"He knows; that is enough for me!"

"Yes, unless he was lying, the better to win your confidence, little lady! Or—what if he was Basil Imroy in person?"

Carmen gave a great start, only saving herself from a fall by a swift clutch at her husband's body. But then she almost fiercely negated that wild idea.

"No, no, Juan! Could I be so deceived? Could I be near him, see him, speak with him, yet fail to recognize that devil of devils?"

"You saw this Silky Steele, Carmen, yet you tried to slay him for the destroyer of your poor Rosina," bluntly retorted the ex-cowboy, thinking only of carrying his point. "Where was your boasted instinct then, that it failed to warn you of your mistake?"

No words came by way of answer, but Carmen dropped her head until it touched his. And then—poor John Edgar felt hot tears begin to trickle down the back of his neck!

Carmen was a woman, after all, and whether so intended or not, she brought woman's best, surest weapon into play, and from that moment the mastery was hers!

"Carmen! Carmencita!" huskily mumbled Edgar, trying to turn in the saddle without too seriously endangering her balance on the croupe.

Never mind what followed. Any married man can readily guess at it all, and safely predict the final outcome.

Once more they rode on toward Camp Climax, and John's first coherent speech plainly proved which of the twain had won the day:

"Dry thy pretty eyes, Carmencita! It shall be as thou sayest, sweet heart! Why, angel of angels! didst thou ask me to fetch thee down yon moon, I'd do thy wishes, or break my blessed neck trying!"

A kiss instead of a tear rewarded him, and Edgar had the consolation of knowing that, if he wasn't doing exactly right, he was acting precisely as the vast majority of loving husbands would have done under similar circumstances.

Nothing more transpired to delay their journey, and they entered Camp Climax in safety, there to meet with strange adventures!

CHAPTER XXIII.

WINNING HIS CONFIDENCE.

NOTHING was further from his expectation than such a reception of that name, and Silky Steele nearly swallowed his pipe with the great start it gave him. He sprang to his feet, partly blinded by tobacco-ashes, and before he could fairly offer Cracked Bell aid, a dark figure flashed past him, and Injun Molly took charge of the stricken man.

Slocum muttered an apology for himself, but if she heard, she did not heed him, just then. Her sole thought and care was for Peter.

It seemed something like an epileptic fit, though devoid of the more repulsive characteristics of that dread disease, and Slocum won the impression, from Injun Molly's prompt, decisive movements, that his was not the first by many which the mountain vagabond had experienced.

Her calmness quickly steadied the gambler's nerves, and at her first effort to raise up that now limp, shivering figure, his strong arms were at her service, and he carried Peter Bell to the little hut beneath the three trees. Placing him upon a low cot near the rear wall, Steele drew back, to say in low, earnest tones:

"Can't I do more, Molly? God knows I didn't mean to hurt him, but I feel almost like a murderer, this minute!"

"Molly do—no need you. Dat true, no mean hurt. Molly hear, see, feel all dat! Now—go wait! Call if want, but no tink. Peter sleep, den eye open all right!"

Injun Molly spoke rapidly and, for her, at remarkable length when another than Peter Bell was an auditor. Silky Steele lingered, tempted to tear away the mask which he felt almost positive Molly was wearing; but then, as she seemingly lost all consciousness of him or his presence in her care for Peter, he turned and left the hut, going back to the little fire.

He was there, trying to extract comfort from the ashes left in his pipe, when Injun Molly came swiftly to his side, a blanket in her hands.

"Peter sleep—dat good! Eye open, he well! You—sleep, no feel bad 'bout dat! All safe, dis place, so no need keep eye open."

Dropping the blanket by his side, Molly beat a hasty retreat, and before Silky Steele could think even to bid her good-night, she had closed the door of the little hut behind her.

"If she's all Injun, I'll eat my hat!" was his emphatic answer to a doubt which flashed into existence as that figure vanished from his sight. "For little I'd—What relation is Cracked Peter to her?"

That was a question easier asked than answered, and Steele Slocum made no serious at-

tempt at doing so. True, he had taken a strong interest in the woman, but that was partly owing to the unusual circumstances under which their meeting had taken place, with the events which had followed so rapidly.

He had helped to save her from the grip of the gang who followed the lead of Big Elephant, and, later, Injun Molly had almost surely saved his life from the road-agents. That was plenty to account for his strong and growing interest in the woman, yet—

"Feels as though this grass harbored a million sand-fleas!" muttered the Stay-in Sport, springing to his feet and giving himself a vigorous shake. "Talk about sleep! I couldn't—Steady, you infernal idiot!"

Hardly self-complimentary, but undoubtedly sincere! And, the better to calm the fever which had been creeping over him unawares, Silky Steele took a tour of inspection through that inclosed oasis.

Such it might properly be termed, as the brightening moonlight now proved to his wondering, admiring gaze.

On all sides towered great rocky walls, in places nearly as perpendicular as the side of a house, at none with a slope gradual enough to insure an easy or safe passage, up or down, for even a mountaineer horn. Yet the inclosed tract, of something less than two-score acres, was green and productive, thanks to the many springs which gurgled out from those gray rocks, to unite in a single brook which made its way under the mountain, to join the larger stream on the other side of that curiously narrow "hog-back."

All this Steele Slocum took in by moonlight, and as he passed around that natural amphitheater, he took closer note of where Peter Bell had been working for his gold.

"A pocket! It'll serve his time and wants, but—is it anything more? Does it come from the wearing away of these mighty rocks by time and weather, or did some old-time convulsion of the earth cast up this pay-dirt to—Good-night! I'm going to bed!"

That brief tour had cooled Silky Steele off, bodily as well as mentally. His garments were still damp from his groping through the dark waters, and the night air was cool enough to make the thought of a woolen blanket very inviting indeed!

Putting the blanket to its natural use, Silky Steele quickly lost himself in dreamland, sleeping without a restless movement until the new day dawned, and a shrill sneeze from the nasal trumpet of Cracked Bell brought him to a sitting posture, with almost painful celerity.

The welcome scent of food greeted his nostrils, and as he sprang to his feet, Injun Molly brought him a portion of a flour-sack, nodding toward an inviting spring hard by.

"Grub ready when you be. Dat wipe—water heap plenty, dere!"

That morning meal passed almost in silence. As before, Injun Molly drew apart from the men. Peter Bell, after a husky mumble by way of greeting, bowed over his tin plate, eating as though he had no more important aim in life than that of putting fat upon his lean ribs. Nor was Silky Steele in haste to lay bare the thoughts which he was gradually shaping in his brain.

But when Injun Molly brought forth the after-meal pipes, he said:

"We can't any of us forget what took place last evening, even if we keep on trying. I chanced to pronounce a name—"

"No say over!" swiftly interposed Injun Molly, her hand touching his lips smartly. "Dat bad! Dat him en'my! Dat mek head go—bad!"

"That'll do, Molly!" almost harshly spoke up Peter Bell. "Let him say his say, then—ef they hain't room 'nough hyar fer us all, why—"

"Wait a bit, Peter," in his turn interrupted the Stay-in Sport. "If any one has to pull out, of course I'm that man. But—why must you drive away one who is more than willing to be your friend? You once said you sorely felt the need of just such a friend. If I offer to be that same, can't you believe I'm in honest earnest?"

Whether intentionally or not, Peter Bell cast a swift glance around that little oasis among those grim hills. Steele Slocum flushed hotly as he noted that look, for it spoke plainer than words.

"You're wronging yourself almost as much as you are me, Peter, by letting such a miserable fancy creep into your mind," he said, quietly. "But—settle all that with the other points. Take Molly, and go talk it over, honestly. If you decide that you can't trust me, I'll never kick. I'll go my way, and forget that we ever met. If you decide that you really need a friend, and I can—but never mind the rest. Go, and talk it over, please."

Injun Molly took Peter's arm, leading him away in silence. And as Silky Steele saw how she took the lead, a brighter light crept into his gray eyes. Somehow he counted far more on Molly than on Peter!

He slowly moved away, taking the opposite direction, pausing to gaze idly into one of the

rock-lined springs, where the rising water kept a few score grains of black sand dancing merrily all the while.

The sound of a slow footfall roused him from his reverie, after a short time, and he turned to see Peter Bell, alone.

His face fell a bit, for he had fully expected to see them both, or Injun Molly by herself. Peter doubtless read that change aright, for he forced a faint smile, saying quietly:

"Molly says it's all right, stranger. She says we need a friend too mighty bad to strike back the fust hand that's held out to us. An' so I've come to—would you mind sayin' over, sir, them words you spoke 'bout Major Nightmare an' that gal-critter?"

Although this was hardly what he had anticipated, Silky Steele gave a brief but clear synopsis of the interview which he had eavesdropped while scouting through the Robbers' Roost. Peter Bell listened with almost painful interest, and a sharp shudder ran over his bowed frame as Slocum pronounced the name of Basil Imroy.

"You said more! You said—you reckon he is—that devil?"

Slocum hesitated before replying, like one who hardly knows what shape his words had better take, but as he saw how strongly the mountain vagabond was bracing his nerves to bear a shock, if one must come, he quietly spoke:

"Of course, Peter, I can't say for sure. I have only my suspicions to go by, but you—you'd ought to be able to settle that point, for the woman took me for Basil Imroy!"

Cracked Bell shook his head with a faint sigh.

"I don't know—I wouldn't know him if I was to meet him face to face, this very moment!"

"But—I thought from what you let drop—"

"I used to know him, years ago, but I've lost my memory, so far as his and other faces of that time goes! I've tried, times without number, to recall his features, but in vain! God help me!" with a groan of bitter pain as his head sunk lower upon his chest. "I've even forgotten how her face looked!"

Silky Steele hardly knew what to say, or what to do. This was even worse than he had expected, from a clearing-up point of view.

"Well, Peter, if one strand breaks, we'll hitch on to another!" he presently declared, with assumed cheerfulness. "I rather counted on that Spanish cat's mistake as a starting point, but—we'll get there, just the same!"

Peter Bell gave a start, and as though that mentioned resemblance had just struck him in its full force, he caught Silky Steele by an arm, gazing keenly, almost fiercely into his face. It was far from being an agreeable ordeal, but the Stay-in Sport endured it without flinching, and presently that vicious grip relaxed, and the vagabond shook his head with a despondent sigh.

"I can't bring it back! I can bring up only a devil's grinning face! Not yours, though! You are too young for—How old are you?"

"Just turned thirty, Peter."

"And he would have been nearly my age! He would have been almost fifty years old, if alive—but he lives! He lives, waiting for my vengeance to overtake him!"

Slocum opened his eyes a bit wider than usual at those words, for they seemed to indicate that Peter was not far past the half-century mark, while he seemed fully a score years older. Yet, trouble draws deep lines, and he might be speaking no more than the simple truth.

"This Imroy: how did he wrong you, Peter?" asked Slocum, after a brief silence.

That was another unfortunate remark, for it sent the mountain rover into a wild frenzy, only less alarming than had been that ugly fit.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE STORY OF A RUINED LIFE.

WITH a hoarse, maniacal screech and laugh combined, Peter Bell tore at his throat as though he was suffocating. Silky Steele tried to lend him support, but with almost maniacal strength, the old man tore away from him, falling to his knees beside the spring, thrusting his bared head repeatedly into the cold water, tossing the spray about like a dog as it shakes itself after a long swim.

At first Slocum feared the crazy being would drown himself, and he crouched near to save by main force, should the necessity arise. But presently Peter Bell staggered back, his clinched hands uplifted and quivering with fiercest hatred, his face ghastly pale, his eyes glowing redly as he hoarsely exclaimed:

"What has he done! How has he wronged me! Only made me an outcast for life! Only robbed me of home, of wife, of honor, of all that mortal man holds dear! Only this—and sent me to a living death, branded with the mark of Cain!"

Those last words rose almost to a shriek, and as they passed his lips, Peter Bell reeled, tottered, would have fallen to earth, only for the strong yet tender support lent him by Injun Molly!

Steele Slocum aided her in bearing that shiver-

ing form to a patch of dry grass, where the genial morning sun would lend him its warmth. Then Molly whispered, rapidly, earnestly:

"Soothe him, pity him, I beg of you, sir! He never needed a true and loyal friend more than he does this day!"

"I'll be that friend, if only for your sake, little lady!" impulsively answered the Stay-in Sport.

He showed no sign of wonder that Injun Molly should have learned to speak his language with such fluency, so different from the dialect she had always used while within his hearing. Neither did he think how oddly his own term was, when applied to a painted Indian squaw!

But Peter Bell was not too far gone to both hear and understand, and in almost harsh tones he bade Molly begone.

Without a word she obeyed, but Silky Steele caught sight of a finger-tip pressing against a pair of red lips, and he nodded his perfect understanding. And yet—did he know the truth, even by instinct?

"You said you would be my friend: did you mean all that term ought to imply, Mr. Slocum?" the old man slowly asked, a keen yet wistful light in his eyes as they rested upon that face.

"I meant all I said, sir. I will be your friend, if you permit me. I will do my level best to serve you, if that lies in my power."

Peter Bell gave a sigh of relief. Even a skeptic such as he had been made by bitter grief, wrongs and suffering, could no longer doubt one so gravely earnest.

In silence he reached forth a hand, and as their fingers closed on each other, the compact of friendship was signed and sealed.

"Whether or no you can be of service to a miserable wretch like me, Mr. Slocum, is more than I dare guess, just now. Still, you can do nothing without knowing just how I have been wronged."

"Are you strong enough to tell such a painful story now? There is no great rush, surely. I am willing to wait, and—"

"I have been waiting for years!" with a faint, weary laugh that was more sorrowful than a sob. "I may have to wait until death comes to break the seal. But—now or never!"

"If you think it best, I'll listen, sir; but don't overtask your powers, for her sake, if not for your own!"

Peter Bell made no immediate reply. His head was bowed upon his hands, and he seemed trying to collect the bitter facts of a troubled past. When he did speak, it was without preface.

"I was happy, then! I was rich, young, healthy, married to an angel! So I believed then, so I know now, though at one time—that was when madness claimed me for its prey!"

"I saw you look at me in surprise a bit ago, Mr. Slocum," abruptly breaking in upon himself, with a faint, fleeting smile. "I am far less old than I look, for I am just turned fifty years of age. My troubles began when I was not far along in the thirties, though, to look back, it seems as though centuries had dragged their weary length along since I fled—"

His voice grew too faint and too husky for Slocum to separate the words, and once again he begged Peter Bell to give over until he was better fit for recalling the past.

"No, that time will never come! I must tell you now, or I may never again find the necessary courage to rake up the bitter black past! So—bear with me, friend, and let me talk after my own manner."

"I was living in Boston, then. I had a good business, down-town. I had a quiet, comfortable home over in the Back Bay district. I had a wife, and a baby girl!"

"Those were my blessings. My one curse was a fondness for wine, and a passion for cards. My great misfortune was falling in with a circle of gay, reckless young men of business and the professions."

"We had a private club, where we met to gossip, to smoke, to drink, to play; we never called it gambling, for that would have sounded too vulgar! Yet—gamble we did, and for higher stakes than many of us could well afford, too!"

"It was at the club that I first met and formed the acquaintance of Basil Imroy. I did not form his friendship, understand, for I could never like, never thoroughly trust him! And yet he was a prime favorite with nearly every other member of that club."

"If I had always been myself, I would never have introduced such a man to my home and my wife. But—you are man of the world enough to understand—I was not always myself. I was born with the taste for drink. My father was a man who always kept liquor in his house, and never sat down to a meal without the decanters on the table. From him I inherited my tastes."

"I do not wish to blame him too severely. He meant well, for he was the soul of honor, after the code under which he was raised: he came from the South, and cavalier blood filled his veins. He could drink, yet be none the worse for so indulging his appetites. But I—I inherited his tastes, his fierce temper, his weak-

nesses, but none of his great strength, moral or physical.

"Am I growing wearisome?" with a faint smile that seemed sadness itself to those sympathizing eyes. I cannot help it! It is hard—so hard! to talk of those terrible days, even to a true and loyal friend, such as I begin to feel you will be to me!"

"You have my word, sir; I never went back on that, to either friend or foe. I surely will not begin backsliding now!"

"I took Basil Imroy home with me, one evening. It had been a holiday, and nearly all of it I had spent at the club. I was not drunk, but neither was I my natural self. If I had been—but I spoke of that once before!"

"That visit was only the first of many which Basil Imroy paid. He seemed strongly attracted by my wife, and she—I fancied she was nearly as much drawn toward him! I know now that I wronged her, but—such was the fact, and I am going to conceal nothing from you!"

"There came a time when I found my business affairs were growing badly involved. I had lost considerable sums in outside speculations, and nearly as much in our frequent seances at the club rooms."

"But I fell to work, and finally managed to pass the crisis without letting the business world know how narrowly I had escaped shipwreck."

"I said nothing of my troubles at home. My wife was young, gay, had never known what anxiety of that sort meant. I regarded her as too sacred for such cares, and never once thought of seeking comfort and renewed courage in her moral support."

"It was only another one of my errors, you see," with a repetition of that faint, bitter-and-sad smile. "Like many another better man before and since, I was building up my own ruin!"

"If I had confided in her, I know now that she would have proved herself a helpmeet indeed! And then, trusting and cheering each other, there would have been no room left for the gayety on one side, mad jealousy on the other! But—it was so written!"

"When I had time for a breathing spell, I found out that Basil Imroy had been a frequent visitor at my house, though never at hours when my business occupations would admit of my being there to receive him."

"I worshiped my wife! She was my idol! And, beginning to realize what manner of man this Basil Imroy was, it cut me to the quick to find that he was so often with her—my angel of purity!"

"My nerves were shattered by the terrible strain I had undergone for long weeks, and when I spoke to her about Imroy, doubtless I used too harsh words. She was proud and high-spirited, like all of her race. And then came our first serious quarrel!"

"Not our last, worse luck! One word led to another, and I grew harder, less reasonable, each time I learned that Basil Imroy had been there. And then—the devil of jealousy took full possession of me, and I—I charged her, my wife, with loving that demon!"

"She would not deny it. She was too deeply insulted, as I verily believe now. Then—I taunted her with being unable to deny the damning truth! That night I passed away from home, at the club."

"I drank far more than was my wont, and I was drunk long before day dawned. But, drunk though I had been, I had caught mocking hints and thinly-veiled allusions to Imroy and his good fortune!"

"I was past resenting those insults then, but I recalled something of their tenor the next day, and I went home, to quarrel furiously with my wife, when she could not, or would not deny that Imroy had been with her that evening. Quarreled so madly that I drew the neighbors near enough to hear me vow I'd cut her false throat in case she sinned again in like fashion."

"I went back to the club-rooms, the next night, resolved to keep sober enough to call all to account who dared fling forth even the ghost of a hint. I hoped Imroy might put in an appearance, but in that I was disappointed."

"Smothering my fierce rage caused me to drink far more than I had intended, and before I realized my peril, I felt that I was growing drunk again! Then—as some one chanced to mention the name of Basil Imroy, the foul hint was flung forth! He was connected with my wife in such a manner that I could no longer doubt he had openly boasted of his good fortune!"

"I knocked the vile slanderer down. I would have stamped him to a mummy, only for the others. They put me out of the club, and as soon as I could collect my scattered wits sufficiently, I started for home."

"In my insane jealousy, I expected to find Basil Imroy there, with my wife, and I firmly resolved to kill them both, then take my own life!"

"Instead—God of the sinners!" groaned the poor transgressor, bowing his head and shivering like one in an ague-fit, yet forcing himself to reveal the whole horrible truth. "Instead, I found her—dead! Dead, with a knife-thrust through her poor heart!"

CHAPTER XXV.

MARKED WITH THE BRAND OF CAIN.

EVEN now that hideous vision seemed to be before him, and the mountain outcast shivered like a leaf as he cowered there by the spring, his face buried in his hands.

Strongly affected, Steele Slocum longed to give consolation, but he knew how worse than idle empty speech must be where grief is so deep and bitter, and he wisely held his peace.

Instead of words, he gently touched that bowed head with his hand: a gentle, yet firm and sustaining touch, such as only a strong and helpful sympathizer knows how to give.

Little by little that spasmodic shivering died away. Bit by bit Peter Bell seemed to rally his shattered nerves, and though he said no word of thanks, and merely cast a fleeting glance toward that gravely sympathetic face, Steele Slocum felt that his meaning had not been entirely lost.

"The rest can wait until later, Mr. Bell," he said, but only to have an almost fierce gesture cut short his further speech.

"No! There may never come another day for me, and I will finish, now I have made a beginning. If it proves too much for you, why—"

"I was not thinking of myself, sir, but of you."

After a brief pause, during which Peter Bell seemed trying to pick up the scattered threads of his life-history, he abruptly resumed:

"To this day, I cannot remember what I said or what I did during that fearful time. That sight must have driven me beside myself, and it was many a long month before I could even attempt to reason or to plan. All of my actions then must have been guided by animal instinct."

"I suppose I must have given the alarm, for the next thing I can even dimly recall is my being tightly gripped by a pair of policemen. I know that I was harshly treated and roughly spoken to. I fancy that they had to use their clubs. Then—I know I must have broken away and made my escape, though just how that was done, I have never been able to study out."

"It may seem odd to you, who have never known what it is to lose a slice out of your life, but this blank page has given me actual torture through thousands of gloomy hours! If I could only know—but I must not give way to that crazing puzzle!"

"Why not pass over all this, Peter?" gently asked Slocum, feeling more than words could tell for the wretched being whose past life had been so utterly blasted. "I know you never did this cruel deed, and I can readily guess whose devilish hand shed that innocent blood. Then—why not pass over all until you come down to to-day?"

Cracked Bell flung out a hand in an impatient gesture, which the sport from Camp Climax was quick to interpret; he would tell his tale after his own fashion, or tell it not at all.

"I know so little of that time, through my own recollection, but I have tried to put it together, now a patch, then a piece, joining them both with a ray of light, until I can understand pretty much all that followed that horrible discovery."

"I know that I was arrested, charged with being the murderer of my poor wife. I know that I broke away, and eluded pursuit, but that is nearly all I can recall of my own memories. Where I lay hid, or if I found friends to help save me from prison, I cannot to this day decide!"

"I have learned since that the papers were full of my case; they called it the 'The Black Bay Crime!' One and all they urged my capture and punishment. Not one ever gave utterance to a doubt as to my guilt. Why should they?"

"My neighbors came forward, and in interviews with the reporters, wildly exaggerated our quarrels. They declared that, times without number, I had been heard to threaten my wife with death for flirting with other men! And so—public opinion condemned me in advance, and as the newspapers spoke, so the people!"

"From those very papers, long afterward, I learned that my manner of escape was a profound mystery. That no efforts were spared to bring me to the bar of justice. That many strong hints were flung out as to those high in police circles—and of the wrong politics, of course!—having been corrupted by gold to connive at my escape!"

"Of course," dryly commented the gambler, as Peter Bell broke off to moisten his parched throat at the convenient spring. "A paper hasn't much git-up-an'-git about it if it can't hatch up a theory when a natural one fails to offer. It fills just as much space, and creates even more talk!"

"If I had help. I can't recall it, as I said before," Peter Bell resumed, paying no attention to that bit of latter-day philosophy. "I know that I must have drifted West, for there I was when something like my former clearness of brain returned to me. And then, after long brooding and much thinking, I did all I knew how to make my disguise complete, then went back to Boston!"

"I had altered greatly during that year of darkness. I seemed a full score years older, and my figure was bent and bowed, almost as much as you see it now. So, you understand, it was not so very difficult for me to pass through my native streets without my identity being suspected."

"In the reading-room of the library, I secured a file of papers, and sacredly read every allusion to that tragedy. It did not seem to me then that all this was printed about me and mine. It was more like reading extracts from some novel, some fantastic dream! Even the names were hardly familiar to my unsettled brain, at that time."

"From those files I learned how surely I had been marked with the brand of Cain!"

"Not another name was used in connection with the crime. A breath of suspicion never fell upon the real criminal. To me, and to me alone the hand of justice pointed as the assassin!"

"We had quarreled times beyond counting, and I had savagely threatened to kill her. I was caught rushing away from the house, my hands bloody, my garments spotted with gore. I fought desperately for liberty, and nearly killed a policeman in breaking away from arrest."

"More: the weapon with which the awful deed was done, lay on the floor by the side of the murdered wife, and it belonged to me! It had belonged to my father, and to his father before him. It was a highly prized heirloom, with a long and interesting history attached to it. More than once its bright blade had been stained with fresh blood, but always in honorable combat; never until now had it been soiled by crime!"

Silky Steele, despite his patience, was growing both weary and uneasy. Would Peter Bell never come to the point? He spoke slowly, almost dreamily, staring at vacancy with unseeing eyes.

Was this a veritable life-history, or was it but the creation of a diseased brain?

"You said you had a child: what of her?" he ventured to ask.

Peter Bell gave a start at sound of his voice. He stared at the young man for a brief space, then that dull, glazed look fled from his eyes and he spoke more naturally:

"Yes, I had a child! I had forgotten her, until I read that she had been taken in charge by a distant relative, then living at Barnstable. And as I read, my love for little Ellie—her name was Eleanor—came back with redoubled force. I read on, until the subject was dropped as of no further interest to the daily reader. And then—I resolved to go steal a glimpse of our—of her child!"

"I don't think I had any settled idea of stealing Ellie, then. It came to me when I caught my first glimpse of her, playing on the sands alone, singing merry as a lark. Poor child! she was too young then to know what a terrible blight had fallen over her life: better for her, perhaps, had she never lived to grow older!"

"Don't say that, man!" almost harshly cried the Stay-in Sport. "You are the last man in the world who has a right to utter such words! If she had died—"

That cold, steady gaze caused his voice to falter, his speech to break off abruptly. Just then the nerves of the gambler were hardly more reliable than those of the vagabond.

"I stole Ellie away. Never mind just how. I'm not sure I could make it clear to you, even were I to try. My brain—my memory is not what it should be for a man of my age, but—I've suffered so much!"

"We wandered far away toward the West, and when I felt that we were safe from pursuit and discovery I asked myself what was to come next? I felt hopeless of ever proving my innocence, and, for my child's sake, I dared not make the attempt. With me gone, what would become of her?"

"So I decided to bury the past forever, leaving vengeance to high Heaven—unless—but how could that be, when I never even suspected whose hand had done that terrible deed! We might meet, face to face, any day, yet I would never recognize the assassin!"

"So I resolved to bury all, as I said. And, with this end in view, I fell to questioning my little girl, to see how much I would have to blot from her childish memory. And right there I struck the first positive clew to the vile assassin!"

"She spoke of a bad, ugly man who used to make her mamma cry after he had gone away! And, by careful questioning, I was not long in deciding that she meant none other than Basil Imroy!"

"Little by little I brought forth proofs against the man I had never liked, and whom I now hated worse than the devil hates holy water. Ellie was young, but she was ever a bright, intelligent child, and she had noted points which would have escaped the majority of children."

"By patiently questioning the child, giving over when she seemed forgetful or weary, for I wanted nothing but the truth, I gradually became nearly convinced that I owed all my

trouble to Basil Imroy! At least, he alone of all the men who had ever visited at my house, answered the description which Ellie gave of the 'bad, naughty man who made mamma cry'."

"From her childish lips I began to learn how wrongfully I had suspected my poor wife of falsity. From her lips I learned that Basil Imroy played on my wife's love for me, her unworthy husband!"

"One day, Ellie said, the naughty man came, and when mamma wouldn't go down to see him, he came right up-stairs, and into their room before mamma could stop him. She was angry, and told him to go away, but he only laughed and said something that made her mamma still more angry. And then, when her mamma threatened she would tell me, and have him punished, he laughed still more, and told her to do it if she dared: that if trouble came, he would kill her, Ellie's, papa!"

"I can't tell you all my little girl told me. To you, a stranger, it would not mean nearly so much. To me, it meant everything: it meant that I had cruelly wronged my wife in suspecting her of infidelity, even so far as flirting was concerned. It meant that, while I was suspecting her, and plotting to trap her in crime, she was suffering for my sake! It meant that Basil Imroy, by threatening my life, forced her to receive his calls, and say nothing about his attempts at love-making!"

"And when Ellie told me that he had been there that very evening, it meant that now I knew who committed that foul crime!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

HOW HOPE WAS BORN AGAIN.

"WHEN I could no longer doubt that Basil Imroy had murdered my innocent wife, I placed my little girl in safe hands, then hastened back to Boston, hoping to bring the demon to justice. I never stopped to weigh the chances against success. I felt convinced that he was guilty, and never doubted but that I could bring him to pay the full penalty."

"I was not long in learning differently, once I was in Boston. For one thing, I could only act from under cover, for I learned that an indictment for murder had been found against me, and was still pending over my head: and is to this day, for that matter!"

"Still, in course of time I learned that Basil Imroy had left town, no one appeared to know whither, so far as I dared press my inquiries. The general impression was that he had gone West, but to what quarter, all seemed ignorant."

"I dared not appeal to the law for help, as you may readily imagine. If I had held positive proof of his guilt, I might have felt justified in giving myself up; but what proof did I have? Only the childish prattlings of a mere infant!"

"I gave over that hope, and went back to my child. With her, I wandered through the West, hunting for Basil Imroy, striking many a clew that seemed to promise success, but as often failing, unless I lost it before my belief was decided, for or against."

"At times I gave over in despair, and then it was that I gave Eleanor lessons: I made a good teacher, for she was all I had to live for!"

"I don't think I have ever fully recovered from that terrible shock; something seemed to give way in my brain when I came upon the corpse of my murdered wife! And then—faintly at first, but growing with each day that passed—I began to think myself hunted by the bounds of the law! I fancied every stranger I chanced to meet was a detective officer in search of the supposed uxoricide! And at last this horrible fear, real or fancied, drove me far from civilization with my poor child!"

"I can't tell you very much of the months that followed, because that period is little better than a blank to me. I know that we must have suffered greatly from exposure and lack of proper food. I know, because I was told of it later, that we were found by a Ute squaw, far away in the mountains, nearly at the point of death from starvation."

"She fed us back to sufficient strength to go with her to her people, and there we must have lived for a number of years, before my brain grew clear enough to comprehend what and where we were."

"Then Eleanor, herself in Indian garb, just as I was, gradually let me see that she knew all; that while I was out of my mind, I had talked enough to show her my past. And when I was strong enough, she begged me to trust wholly in her love and prudence."

"That was the beginning of a new life for both of us. I had one in whom I could confide my hopes and fears, she one who needed her love and support! And after telling her everything I could recall, Eleanor agreed with me that it would be worse than useless to attempt to clear up the bitter black past."

"God knows, and so does dear mother," she would say. And so—I was content to let all drift with the current!"

Peter Bell ceased speaking, casting a half-shy glance toward Silky Steele, as though he expected a blunt reproach. If so, he was agreeably disappointed. Whatever he might think, Slocum kept his peace.

"If I had been stronger in my brain, I might have acted differently. I might have realized the great injustice I was doing my child, in keeping her out there in the wilderness, without training or schooling other than I could give her; little enough, God knows!" with a sigh of genuine regret. "Still, I did my best, and I believe—but that don't count! I was telling you how I came to strike a lead of hope, once again!"

"We spent years with the Utes, and, at her own suggestion, Eleanor assumed their garb, just as she learned their language. From the old squaw who had rescued us from death by starvation, she learned the secret of a harmless dye, made from roots, which would give her skin the right tinge."

Once again he hesitated, with that peculiar glance toward his companion, and once again the expected interruption failed to come. Silky Steele made no sign, patiently waiting for the end of that long, rambling recital.

This revelation was no new thing to him, for he had long since decided that "Injun Molly" was far from being *all* red-skin.

"After a long residence with the Utes in their mountain home, the old fear assailed me once more. It was foolish, for no white men ever came to that lonely village. They were Mountain Utes, and had never been placed upon a reservation. I doubt if the authorities even suspected the fact of their existence."

"Still, I fought in vain against that fear, and when Molly—that was the name Eleanor took for her own, with her Indian garb and hue—realized this, she was the one who proposed we resume our wanderings. She never abandoned all hope of clearing my name, though I never knew this until long afterward!"

"We wandered here and there, hovering near the mining-camps, for we needed provisions and ammunition, but never settling down long in any one spot, until a kindly providence led us to this secure refuge."

"I had wounded a black bear—cowardly, as all of its family is—and instead of showing fight, as the other species will, it tried to escape by flight, taking to the stream near where this little brook passes through the rocks to unite with its larger mate beyond."

"I needed food and followed closely. I found the brute, dying, just inside the passage yonder, and the discovery of this lovely refuge followed almost as a matter of course."

"After inspecting this little valley I turned back, butchered my game, then hastened to where I had left Molly in camp. I told her of my adventure, and early the next morning we went together to inspect this place—to finally decide on making our home here, where no one was ever likely to intrude upon us, for good or for evil."

"At that time, and for nearly a year afterward, I never once dreamed that gold existed near us. That was before Camp Climax was born, and the nearest settlement was nearly fifty miles away."

"I felt safer here than I had for many a long day. We lived in a little world of our own, and I saw my fellow-men only when absolutely obliged to seek the settlement to supply our few wants."

"I again fell to teaching Molly what I could; we had no books, no pens nor paper, of course, but I made substitutes for the last, until I could procure them from down-country. And so time passed on, until the day came when our quiet, peaceful life was to again know a change."

"That was hardly a year ago. Camp Climax was flourishing, and the occasional glimpse of men making money—wresting it from those bare rocks—gave me a touch of the same mad fever; only a touch, but it led to the discovery of gold in fair abundance right under our feet!"

"I spent my idle hours washing out dust and tiny nuggets. I did not need much gold for our wants were simple, and neither Molly nor I expected to ever live any other life than this. Still, I laid up a goodly store of the yellow dross, and I believe I have pretty well cleaned the bonanza out!"

He gave a short laugh as he spoke that word. It called up no pleasant memories, surely.

"It was while finding gold so easily that Molly first began to talk about hunting for Basil Imroy, to clear my name from stain; and as we wondered whether or no he might not be attracted to Camp Climax by the wondrous tales which shrewd miners began to scatter broadcast over the lands, Molly thought of painting her face, of imitating tattoo-marks with dye, and of doing all she could to increase her apparent age."

"She convinced me it would be safer for both of us if she passed for my wife, and—so it came to pass."

"You must know something of the trouble those gold-lovers have given me. My paying gold in a silver region could not escape notice, and that led to wild rumors of my having found a marvelously rich placer. Of course I was watched, but, thanks to the only possible way by which one can gain this place in safety, we have thus far kept our secret from all save two others: yourself, and poor Sandy McIntosh!"

"He came near finding his death in finding our secret refuge! He fell from yonder rocks, and when we found him, he was little better than a corpse, terribly bruised and badly broken up."

"I am not so sure that I would have labored to save him, had I lived here alone, but Molly had a softer heart, and I could not go against her wishes. So—we fought back death for many long weeks, and at length the victory was won."

"It was during that long, painful convalescence that I first realized how pitifully small is this huge world of ours! For—this battered specimen of humanity, this ragged, dirty, whisky-weakened prospector, had once been a respected citizen of Boston! A lawyer, he had entered upon life with the brightest of prospects, and—*Bah!*" flinging out one hand, and giving his shaggy hair a toss as he spoke harshly: "Why do I beat around the bush? Sandy McIntosh used to belong to that club of which I have said so much, at the very time my life was blackened for all time!"

"He recognized you, then?" asked Slocum.

"Not at first; not until long after I had drawn forth his own history, and recalled him as one of the party with whom I had played cards on the very night that—Well, on that night!"

"I asked him about Basil Imroy, and he cursed him for a dirty dog, a thief, ingrate, assassin! And then—*hope was born again!*"

Words which one might expect to be uttered in joyous tones, but which came rather as a groan from the lips of that bowed, broken wanderer.

"Though a black cloud creep over the face of the sun, friend, the glory is still there! The cloud will pass, the sun will shine brightly again!"

"Never for me! Never more for me!"

"So you thought before this lost prospector fell into your refuge, your life. So it may chance to come again, for—*hope never dies!*"

"This hope has!" almost fiercely cried Peter Bell, lifting his head and dashing the tears from his tangled beard. "It perished when Sandy died! It—Heaven blight the demon who killed my hope while murdering poor Sandy!"

Silky Steele saw how vain any effort at consolation was, while that mood should last, and he sat in silence, only his sympathetic eyes saying aught of comfort.

Gradually Peter Bell grew calmer, and then he spoke again:

"Sandy did more than curse and call Basil Imroy names, Peter! He proved that your suspicions were based on truth! He knew that Imroy was the real assassin!"

"Unless he lied, yes! He swore Basil Imroy killed my wife!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

ONLY TO SINK IN DEATH.

THAT was highly important, if true, and having listened with close attention to all of that long recital, Steele Slocum could not marvel at the half-stupor into which Peter Bell had been cast by that sudden, and, as yet, unexplained murder.

It was on the point of his tongue to ask why Peter had wasted time in putting all to the test, but he feared to still further agitate the sorely-shaken wanderer.

The old man was forced to cool his lips and throat at the spring, but presently he resumed his story, with far more of coherence than Silky Steele had dared hoped for, taking that terrible agitation and excitement into consideration.

"It was a long time before I could fairly win that admission from the lips of poor Sandy, though he was truly grateful to us for all we had done for him. And before he spoke out plainly, he had more than begun to suspect the truth: that I was the man who had fled from Boston with such a hideous crime charged up against him!"

"But he *did* declare that Basil Imroy was the guilty man?" ventured the Stay-in Sport, impatience getting the better of his prudence, as his strange host seemed bent on going backward, instead of forward.

Peter Bell flung out a hand with an almost fierce gesture. His haggard face flushed purple, and his sunken eyes caught a ruddy glow of mingled anger and fear.

"Don't—ask me no questions! You mix my brain—I have to fight the muddy clouds away as it is! Let me—What was I saying?"

"About Sandy McIntosh!" reluctantly said Slocum.

"Yes—poor Sandy!" with a deep, long-drawn breath that was almost a sigh. "He was all broken up! But—Molly saved his life with her care and—But I told you that, didn't I?"

Silky Steele nodded assent to that wistful, troubled look. Dearly as he hoped all this might prove true, he was beginning to doubt if what he had listened to was aught better than a crazy man's dream.

And yet—Molly was a reality!

"I'll get the truth from her, even if Peter is

incapable of telling it," was his reflection, and that belief gave him a fresh stock of patience.

For some little time there was silence between them. After one warning, Silky Steele was unwilling to risk another question, and Peter Bell seemed to find it very hard to pick up the broken thread. When he did speak, however, it was connectedly as before.

"It was near the beginning of winter that Sandy fell down yon rocks, and it was fair spring before he could set foot to ground, to support his own weight! A long, weary spell that was! And yet—it gave both Molly and me something to do, to think of, to talk about."

"It was when Sandy was growing strong enough to sit up, and be moved out of doors to bask in the sun, sheltered from the cool breeze as he was in this little valley. I can't recall just how it came about, or just what led to his telling of that portion of his wild life, but before I well knew what was coming, I felt that he was telling what I had prayed for these many long years!"

"He spoke of meeting an old acquaintance at a gambling den, in a Texas city; I can't recall the name, nor does it matter. There was not much in the story itself; merely a row over cards, where one man accused the other of cheating. There was a fight, and to save himself from hurt in the confusion which followed, Sandy knocked one of the disputants down, just as he seemed about to get the better of his rival."

"That rival, Sandy said, afterward proved to be an acquaintance whom he had lost track of for many years. He and Sandy grew quite familiar, after that night, though neither just then recognized the other for what he had been in the old time; that did not come until, one night while drunk, this Ferd Bernard began boasting of his many adventures."

"Among other brags, he swore that never yet had man or woman escaped him when once his mind was fully set on bringing them within his net; and then, only a few minutes after making that boast, he let drop a few words which gave Sandy McIntosh a great start."

"In that instant he recognized the old club-mate whom he had known in Boston as Basil Imroy!"

Steele Slocum was listening with strong interest, now, but he dared not risk any of the questions which flashed across his busy brain, lest he once more throw the sorely-shattered brain of the speaker into mad confusion.

Peter Bell caught his breath, then continued:

"Sandy said, when talking to me, long afterward, that before he could fully decide whether or no to claim acquaintance, the demon who then passed as Ferdinand Bernard, began maun-dering about a woman whom he taught a life-lesson on one occasion. And as he listened, he gradually became convinced that the demon was talking about my wife!"

"He said that she was the only woman who had ever foiled his designs, on whom he had made a systematic attack, and that *she* had paid an even worse penalty for her folly!"

"You can faintly imagine with what breathless interest, mixed with horror, that I listened to Sandy, Mr. Slocum," huskily said Peter Bell. "Almost from his first sentence I knew that I was listening to the true story of my own black tragedy! Each word cut me worse than a keen knife, yet I forced myself to listen without betraying a sign of all this!"

"From what I have already told you, you can guess what that story was; when he could no longer frighten my poor wife into promising to cover his devilish insults—they had gone no further—and when she positively refused to elope with him, as he swore she must that black night—he caught up that knife from where it hung on the wall, and drove it to her true heart!"

Once more Peter Bell broke down, but as Silky Steele said nothing, the old man soon rallied again.

"All this Sandy told us, never dreaming with what terrible interest we were listening, never for an instant thinking how closely it concerned our past lives. But when he came to that dastardly deed I could no longer control myself, and—he knew me for what I was!"

"For a long time after having said so much, Sandy would say no more, though I coaxed and reasoned, prayed and threatened. In his crippled condition he still seemed in awe of that pitiless demon. And it was not until Sandy was fairly able to care for himself, that I succeeded in winning the rest from his lips."

"He said, then, that when they were both sober, he called Bernard by that old name, and was denied so sharply that he foolishly told all the villain had let drop while in his cups. That brought on a quarrel, and Sandy came near losing his life: almost certainly would have done so, had not mutual acquaintances interfered to part them."

"After that his life was attempted on two different occasions, and he believed that Basil Imroy was at the bottom of each. That frightened him, and he left that part of the country under cover of night."

"All this happened nearly half a dozen years before Sandy fell in upon us, but he was still afraid of that demon, and it was only after both

Molly and I wore him out with pleadings that he agreed to help us find and bring that devil to justice.

"I feared that it might be too late: that Basil Imroy had been killed by some of those he had so deeply injured: but Sandy declared that he knew better. And then, though I could not make him tell just why he felt so confident, he told us we would find our game at Camp Climax, unless he had left it since Sandy came to his hurt while hunting for Cracked Bell's Bonanza!"

"Did he tell you under what name to look for him?" eagerly asked Slocum, forgetting his wise resolve for the moment.

"No," despondently muttered the old man, his head drooping. "He did not say, though I begged him, times without number! He said that he must do his work after his own fashion, or he'd not do it at all!"

"I'd have made him talk white, or swallow lead! If he had only told you—but go on!"

"What more is there to say?" huskily groaned the miserable man. "Before Sandy could point out the demon—before he could make sure the villain had not left Camp Climax—he was murdered! You saw him, sir! Killed—murdered—and with one of my child's arrows!"

"I'm not likely to forget it very soon! But—you can't explain how that weapon came to be used: was it lost, or stolen?"

"I haven't tried to explain it! Why should I? When Sandy died, my last hope perished!"

"I don't think so," briskly retorted Silky Steele, giving Peter Bell a sharp slap on the shoulder, more to rally him from that despondent fit into which he was sinking than aught else.

Peter Bell turned his eyes that way, but there was precious little hope to be read in his baggared face or his sunken eyes. He slowly shook his head, then said:

"You mean well, sir, but—that time's past and gone! I've fought my last fight! I'm doomed to die, as I've lived, under the ban!"

"Not if you'll brace up and be a man!" almost harshly retorted the Stay-in Sport. "If you had treated Sandy McIntosh as the bull-headed knave rightly deserved, all this—"

"Don't—he's dead!"

"All right. We'll let Sandy rest, then. But your daughter lives, doesn't she?"

"You know that: she is Injun Molly!"

"And you mean to force her to remain Injun Molly for the remainder of her life? For shame, man!"

"What else can be done? With Sandy, our last hope perished. Even if I was to meet that demon face to face, I could not swear to his identity! I could not—or, if I did, what proof could I bring against him?"

Silky Steele had no answer ready for those questions. He felt their pertinency, but he was not a man to admit even temporary defeat, and his glib tongue did not fail him then.

"You say that your last hope is gone: I don't think so! You say that you couldn't swear to the fellow, even if you were to meet him: I believe you can, and will!"

"How? What can we do?"

"Find the man who shot Sandy McIntosh, and there you have the head villain, Peter!"

"You think—"

"I think Sandy was killed because he knew too much. I think that marked arrow was used to get you two out of the way. It is possible that the slayer didn't really recognize you as the old Bostonian, but I'm open to lay odds that he did! So I say, find the killer!"

"But—how can that be done?"

"Will you trust me? Will you follow my advice from the start?"

"Yes; we will trust you to the death!" came a clear, resolute voice before Peter Bell could reply.

And as he turned quickly, Steele Slocum gave an ejaculation of amazed admiration.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"SLOW TO COME, BUT IN TO STAY!"

AND well he might!

Before him stood "Injun Molly," but no longer the one whom he had known by that name.

Her bronze hue had gone, together with paint-spots and tattoo-marks, leaving her skin smooth and fair, softly glowing just now before that honestly admiring gaze.

In place of that rude Indian garb, a neatly-fitting calico dress had been donned, with tiny ruffles at wrist and throat, a little bunch of wild flowers pinned over her heart. Red ribbons brightened her black hair; in the want of gloss, that alone betrayed the effects of exposure to sun and weather.

Peter Bell seemed even more greatly surprised than was Steele Slocum, but at a half-imporing, half-commanding glance from those dark eyes, he rose to his feet and mechanically introduced the young couple.

"Mr. Slocum, my daughter, Eleanor, this is our last, best friend! If he fails us—"

"But he will never fail us, father!"

"I thank you, Miss Eleanor," said the gambler, bending over the sun-tanned hand which

was impulsively extended toward him. "If I prove false to that trust, may God forget me in my time of need!"

That swift yet almost reverent outburst affected them all, and for a brief space no words were spoken. Their hands joined, and eyes looked into eyes, sealing the compact made by that warm grip.

Steele Slocum was first to speak, though it was not so easy for him to break the spell which that really beautiful face had cast over him.

"Do you really mean that, Molly?"

His face flushed hotly as that more familiar name passed his lips before he was aware of it, but Molly only smiled, her eyes holding his under the spell, seemingly waiting for him to speak still plainer. So at least the sport interpreted that look, and he added:

"You were in earnest, Miss Eleanor? You are willing to trust me?"

"To the death, as I said before," came her quick response. "I have been studying you, sir, ever since you so bravely interfered to save us: a crazy vagabond and a wretched squaw! Stop! I know what we must have appeared to you, and that is just what we wished people to think us. It was our best safeguard."

"Well, if I took you for what you seemed, just then, I soon learned my mistake," said Silky Steele, with a low, soft laugh.

"I know. I feared your keen eyes, at first, but then— Never mind that, now," breaking off as she saw Peter Bell give an uneasy stir. "You are willing to stand our friend, and Heaven knows we need such!"

Peter Bell moved away toward the spring where he had so often quenched his feverish thirst, and after a swift glance toward him, the gambler caught those hands, drawing closer to the young woman, and gazing steadily, ardently into her eyes as he whispered:

"You said you would trust me to the death, Molly, but—can't you promise even more than that? Can't you say, 'I'll trust you with my life, until death doth us part'?"

For a long breath those dark eyes met gray, striving to read the whole truth. Slowly a warm flush crept over her face, and then those lids began to droop. But her hands still lay in that warm grasp, and Steele Slocum whispered again:

"You are a brave girl, Molly. Are you afraid to speak to me?"

Her eyes met him bravely, and though her voice was barely loud enough for him to catch her meaning, those words were likewise brave:

"Save my poor father from going mad. Help him bring the foul assassin of my poor mother to justice, then—ask me what you will!"

"If I ask, you will give, Molly?"

"If you still wish it, then—"

Now her voice failed her, for those gray eyes were telling more than a maiden could bear without confusion, but Silky Steele was more than content, and he finished her sentence with:

"Then I'll claim the richest reward mortal man ever dreamed of, Molly!"

He said no more, just then, for Peter Bell was turning toward them, his shaggy head dripping water, and to blind his eyes to the charming confusion which covered Molly as with a mantle, the Stay-in Sport stepped forward to meet the mountain vagabond half-way.

"Now, sir, I'm ready to talk sober business with you. I've followed your story carefully, and I believe I can put my hand on your bitterest enemy within two hours after we strike Camp Climax again."

"You can do this? You are not merely trying to hearten me up?" almost breathlessly cried the old man, shivering from top to toe with reviving hope.

"If I didn't firmly believe it, be sure I'd never say the word."

"Then come! Don't delay a moment!" exclaimed Peter Bell, catching an arm and trying to drag the Stay-in Sport away to the exit. "You don't know that cunning demon! He escaped me before, through delay on Sandy's part, and now—"

"Go easy, dear friend," soothingly interposed Slocum, his hands closing on those shoulders, his earnest eyes trying to calm the old man by forcing him to meet their gaze. "I'm slow to come, but I'm in this game to stay! If you'll trust me, I'll bring you through a winner. But you mustn't rush me too fast, mind!"

"Have patience, dear father," said Eleanor, now at his other side. "If Mr. Slocum is to serve us, we must let him command."

It was hard for the poor old man to submit, now that a ray of hope had broken through the darkness in which he had lived for so many years, but he could not resist them both, and gradually he grew calm enough to listen to reason.

"I firmly believe that Major Nightmare is really Basil Imroy, and if I am right in this belief, I'm willing to bet long odds I can trap him in Camp Climax. Still, he's a cunning rascal, and even if he hasn't spotted you as his old-time enemy, whom he injured so terribly, he surely will be on his guard against me, after what happened yesterday."

"The major is no fool, as I said. He just as certainly knows something of me, if only by reputation. He'll know that I'll strike back at him for the dirt he played me, and he'll do his level best to get in the first blow."

"Is it—'tis not right for us to ask you to incur such deadly peril on our account!" impulsively broke in Eleanor.

Silky Steele flashed a look that way, and its meaning caused her cheeks to flush and her dark eyes to droop in sweet confusion, which was by no means lessened when he spoke:

"Oh, I'll send in a bill large enough to cover all that, be sure! And then, to be honest, you'll owe me nothing. Even if you had no interest at all in this little game, I'd go for the major, red-hot. I'm slow to start, as I said before, but once roused, I'm in to stay!"

"While I have no positive proof that this rascal has recognized you for what you really are, the killing of Sandy McIntosh, probably the only person in all this world to whom he revealed his guilty secret, would seem to point that way. For, don't forget, you two were in his company the night before his murder. So much for that!"

"Now, if you were to venture back to Camp Climax openly, what would such a conscienceless villain do? Point you out as the slayer of Sandy, and have his gang strike so swift and sure that you wouldn't have a chance to sting him!"

"Mr. Slocum is right, father," said Eleanor, decisively, then turning to the Stay-in Sport, she added: "Tell us what part we are to play, sir, and leave me to convince father."

"Good! Even the judge wouldn't recognize you as Indian Molly!" he exclaimed, admiringly, as he himself recalled that great alteration.

"Then we are to go to Camp Climax in disguise?"

Steele Slocum shook his head in negation, but passed that point by for the moment.

"I'll tell you later. Just now—listen: I saw the face that lies back of the mask Major Nightmare wears while on the road. I know the man, as he is, and I know that a cooler, harder, tougher customer to trap or to handle, never set foot inside of Camp Climax!"

"Knowing all this, I know almost certainly what he will do. If he don't know for certain that I have penetrated his disguise, he does know that I'll try to play even with the whole outfit. So, what will be his first move? To get in the first blow, of course!"

"He has plenty of rascals who will swear that black is white at his asking. He will try to make out that I am Major Nightmare, and have plenty of proof ready to back up that accusation. I don't merely make a guess in saying this; I'm judging him by what I would do myself were I standing in his shoes."

"Yet you are willing to run such terrible risks, for us, strangers?"

"You were strangers once, but you will never be strangers again," was the quick response, backed by a glance that caused those cheeks to grow rosy once more. "As I said, I am working for my own interests in trying to win this game, for I never played for a stake so high, so precious, so well worth the winning!"

Peter Bell shifted uneasily, not because he disliked those veiled hints. That was a secret between Steele and Molly. But he could not bear delay now that a vista of hope was once more opening before him.

Silky Steele noted this, and dropped that earnest jesting.

"You asked me if you were to enter Camp Climax in disguise, Miss Eleanor, and I replied no; that you were to go in your real characters. As what you now are, Judge Ramsey would never think of taking you for the 'Injun Molly' he sought to win to his base ends! As for your father—I only wish I could be as sure of you, sir!"

Peter Bell met that troubled gaze squarely, his voice firm and resolute, his manner undergoing a complete change.

"Swear to help me find Basil Imroy, sir, and never fear but what I'll play my part without an error. So far, you have only seen me a poor, miserable, broken-hearted and broken-spirited vagabond. But—you've given me something to hope for, and I'll not fail you. I swear it!"

"Better than good!" cried Silky Steele, with a clear, ringing laugh that seemed to presage triumph. "Look out for us, major! Maybe we're a little slow to start, but when we do come, we're there to stay!"

"We are to go as our natural selves, you said; does that mean I, too, am to effect a complete transformation?" asked Peter Bell, pointing his meaning by a swift glance toward Eleanor.

"Yes. We're already too late to strike our game before he has a train spread and ready for explosion. A little delay will only help to throw him off his guard, making him think that we've pulled out for good and all, finding the deal too mighty rocky for our health!"

"Now, just promise that you will be guided by me in everything, until the game is won, or I have proved myself a bungler; and then I'll

give you my ideas of how the trick can best be turned."

Two hands went out to meet his, and the promise was given.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BACK TO CAMP CLIMAX.

"GEE-UP thar, ye dug-gun critter! The funder ye go, the slower ye git, an' that's wuss then needless! Ten foot a minute 'ith full steam on, an' bu'st-ye'r-b'iler pulled wide open! Who says we can't git thar ef we jest keep a-goin'?"

The stoop-shouldered, shaggy-bearded fellow jerked his heels up high enough to kick the flanks of the dejected-looking burro he was bestriding, supplementing those efforts with a tough stick cut from a bush along the trail; but he might as well have spared his energetic exertions.

Like the generality of its race, Master Burro held to his own ideas of fitness, and measured his pace in accordance.

"All right, dug-gun ye, Lightnin'! Ef ye won't race, then creep, for I will be minded! An' mebbe we'll hit camp in time fer the gittin'-up bell, sence thar she looms, not more'n a quarter or two off! An' ef the nose o' me hain't ketchin' onto the smell o' hot supper a-comin' to table, then I'll go back onto the name o' me—which'd be a pity fer them as 'mires old alecks!"

Jerking off his greasy, ragged felt hat, giving it a swing and a flourish as though marking time, the rider of the burro broke into a half-song, half-chant, which at one time was marvelously popular along the Pacific Slope:

"You're gazing now on old Tom Moore,
A relic of by-gone days;
And a bummer, too, th-y call me now—
But what care I f-r pr-ise?
My heart is filled with the days of old,
And oft I do repine,
For the days of old, the days of gold,
The days of 'Forty-nine!"

"I had comrades then, a saucy crew,
Hard cases, I must confess;
But still I found them brave and true,
And square men as the best.
They'd stand the pinch, and never flinch,
And never fret nor whine,
But like good old bricks, they stood the kicks,
In the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"There was Poker Bill, he was one of the boys,
He was always in for a game;
And whether Bill lost, or whether he won,
It was always to him the same.
He would ante a slug, or rush the buck,
Or go a battful blind;
But in a game with Death, Bill lost his breath,
In the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"There was Monte Pet, I can never forget,
For the luck he always had;
He'd deal for you both night and day,
Or as long as he had a scad.
One night a pistol laid him low—
'Twas his last lay-out, in fine—
For it caught Pet sure, 'right dead in the door,
In the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"There was Gallus Jake, a butcher boy,
So fond of getting tight,
And where'er Jake got on a spree,
He was sp'il'n' for a fight.
One night he ran against a knife,
In the hands of Old Bob Kline,
So over Jake we held a wake,
In the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"There was Rattle-jack Jim, who could out-roar,
A buffalo-bull, you bet!
Jim roared all night, and he roared all day,
And he might have been roaring yet!
But he fell one night in a prospect hole—
'Twas a roaring bad deigt—
For in that hole Jim roared out his soul,
In the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"There was old Lame Jess, a mighty hard case,
And he nev-r would repent;
Jess never missed a single treat,
Though he never put up a cent!
But poor Old Jess, like all the rest,
Did at length to death resign,
For in his bloom, he went up the dume,
In the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"Of all the comrades I had then,
Not one remains to toast;
I'm left alone in my miserv,
Like some poor wandering ghost!
The sports all say that I'm a fraud,
And call me a 'traveling sign,'
Saying, 'There's Old Tom Moore, a bummer sore,
Of the days of 'Forty-nine!"

"Gee-up, thar, an' mog along, Josey! Ef I hev't git down to—fer Old Tom Moore, read Tom Johnson, and there you have the moral of— I say, pardner!"

In the ardor of his musical efforts the dilapidated wayfarer had drawn closer to Camp Climax and almost ran up against a dapper little sport who was lounging alongside the trail.

"Well, keep on saying it: there's no law to the contrary, that I'm aware of," retorted Billy La Rue, in tones remarkably sour for that usually sweet-tempered cherub of the card fraternity.

"Whoa-ap, Jerusalem Cricket!" grunted the rider, his body going back and his raggedly-

shod feet flying forward as he wrestled with the reins and time-toughened mouth. "Ef I wanted ye to go, you'd stop, an' now I want ye to—Whoa-ap, I tell ye, critter!"

"Don't stop on my account, I beg of you, stranger!"

"But— Whoa-ap! But, I'm wantin' to find a critter—would ye mind to jest chunk him with a dornick, stranger? Git a tough one, ef ye don't want to splatter sand all over a quarter-section! When Jerusalem Cricket once gits a notion— I say, stranger!"

Billy La Rue was moving away, but at that sharp summons he turned, with a bland smile on his babyish-seeming face, to utter:

"If you insist, sir, say on. Only—when you're through, I'll beg of you to hearken unto my tunel sabe?"

"Fit fer tat, eh? Waal, I'm gwine to make sure o' your cat fust, then," grinned the burro-rider. "I say, stranger, kin you tell me whar I mought run acrost a critter who calls hisself Silky Steele?"

"What may your business be with that gentleman, sir?" sharply demanded La Rue, that smile vanishing, leaving his face keen, sharp, full of alertness.

"Gentleman be dug-gun!" exploded Tom Johnson, with a wild flourish of his tightly-clinched fists. "He's a hoss-thief, an' a liar, an' a woman-thumper, an' a card-cheat, an' a— Eh?"

"You are a liar for saying so, sir, and if you'll just step down from that mule, to show cause, it'll save me the trouble of yanking you off," coldly interposed the dapper little sport.

"You don't— I say, pardner, mebbe you hev'n't tuck a look to size me up? Mebbe you don't know who I be? Jest look into the mug o' me, an' then ef you ax me will I git down an' eat ye up, why— Shake, Billy!"

Even then the little sport was slow to realize the truth; but as that cheery laugh rung upon his ears, so different from that other voice, which he could have taken oath was whisky-roughened, he gave a low ejaculation of mingled joy and anxiety, gripping that proffered hand with both of his girlish members.

"Tis indeed you, Silky! I've been watching and waiting for the first glimpse of you, ever since— This way, old man!"

He caught the reins, forcing the burro aside from the trail, but Steele Slocum checked him with:

"What's biting you, Billy? I'm hungry as a wolf, and I've been putting my nostrils to the keen stretch this half-hour! Come help me hunt up supper, and we'll talk it all over then."

"You'd find a box, heap sight quicker, Silky!"

"Do you reckon? They've set the ball to rolling, then?"

"You bet! With the axle thick-greased with ugly lies, too, Silky!"

"I can readily believe as much, Billy," losing something of his gay manner, slipping from the burro and leaving it to feed or go to sleep as it saw fit. "We'll move a little on, pardner, and have a talk-it-over, I reckon. So—you were watching for me?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" almost angrily asked the dapper little gambler, that irritation betraying how much he had suffered through his loyal friendship for this man. "Could I fight the whole camp, single-handed? I offered to do it, though!"

"I'll bet you did, if the camp gave you occasion! Billy, if you were as big in body as you are in soul and heart, the U. S. of A. wouldn't begin to be large enough to contain you! But, business! What's gone wrong in Camp Climax, anyway?"

"Everything!"

"Comprehensive enough for a hog! But—for instance?"

"Well, nine-tenths of the citizens believe you are Major Nightmare, and two-thirds that many have sworn to lynch you out of hand if you ever dare show face or set foot inside of the camp! Is that plain talk enough, Silky?"

"Well, it loosens the bark a little, Billy! Any particular spokesman for the gang?"

"A man and woman started the music. He calls himself John Edgar, and she passes as his wife, I believe. Then Judge Ramsey took up the song, with Big Elephant and that sweet-scented outfit to fill in as chorus. They mean business, Silky!"

"That list sounds like it, surely! You couldn't swallow the dose, though, it appears?"

La Rue gave a sniff of disgust, though he knew that Slocum was in jest, so far as himself was concerned. Never was there truer, stronger friendship between two men than this bond of theirs.

"And my coming back to Camp Climax, in this rig, don't weaken your faith any, Billy?"

"Shut up, or I'll punch you! Talk sense, can't you? It's no joking matter, man! They'll down you, or—"

"We'll down them! Give you two to one, Billy, that I come out on top of the pile when all's cashed in! Take it, old boy?"

"Come off! What's it all mean, and what's the cue? I've played lookout so long, I'm red-

hot to tackle the game as a player! Business, man!"

"You say old Aaron is stacking cards on me, Billy?"

"From the word go! Those two tramps set the tune, and the judge took it up just as though that was what he'd been living for! He is singing the song for all his lungs are worth, and I reckon he could carry nine men out of every ten, if you were to show up this minute!"

"And Big Elephant is chipping in, you say?"

"He swears he'll chaw you up, too, mighty quick! I asked him if I wouldn't do just as well, but he wouldn't bite: said he was saving it all up for Major Nightmare, alias you!"

"Nine out of ten, eh?" thoughtfully commented the Stay-in Sport. "That's a bit worse than I calculated on, Billy! But—how many of those decimals do you reckon you could count on?"

"Enough to make it mighty interesting for the crowd while the music lasted, Silky! Shall I stack 'em up for business?"

"You don't ask how much truth there is in this charge brought against me, Billy?"

"Think I'm a fool?"

"I think you're one man in a thousand, old boy," said Slocum, his tones far from steady as he caught and wrung that soft, woman-like hand. "It's well worth while coming back under a cloud, if only to prove that such friendship is possible!"

"Get out! Don't I know you're all right? Wouldn't I look sweet, joining in such a fool' hue and cry? Drop that, and come down to sober business, old sport! What are you going to do first?"

"One of two things: call on the judge, or on this John Edgar and his wife."

"Not if I can hinder, Silky! Why, man, that would be rank suicide!" impatiently cried the dapper little sport.

CHAPTER XXX.

A RATHER RISKY VENTURE.

"You talk as though you meant it, Billy, but I reckon that's because you haven't got your eyes opened to the whole truth, as yet," coolly observed Slocum, shifting his attitude to one of greater comfort, then proceeding to give a terse yet clear account of his adventures with Major Nightmare and his Bad Dreams after the raid of the road-agents, which ended in his being carried away from Camp Climax.

La Rue listened with closest interest, and if he thought his friend was passing over part of the truth—and he surely must, for Slocum was hardly clear in his dealing with the Peter Bell episode—he gave no sign of impatience or reproach.

"Are you through?" he asked, when the Stay-in Sport came to a pause.

"Well, I reckon I've given you the main points, Billy. What do you think of it now?"

"Just what I thought when you first sprung that crazy notion," was the uncompromising retort. "If you show up in Climax while the tide is running so strongly against you, good-by Silky!"

"I'm betting just the other way, Billy. For one thing, it'll be Tom Johnson that shows up, not Steele Slocum. You failed to spot me, Billy, and I reckon your eyes are keen as any of the others."

"But you can't do anything as Tom Johnson, Silky. You'll have to come out in your true colors, and then— Don't do it, pard!"

"I must, Billy," his tones grave enough now. "I'm in the game to stay, and it's win or lose, off the reel! I think I've got the right combination, and if you'll help me—"

"Up a tree! That's fine help to ask of a pard isn't it?"

"If you'll help me a bit, I'll take the first trick before the head devil knows trouble is breaking loose about his ears, Billy! If you flatly refuse—well, I'll play a lone hand, though that will make the game a little more difficult to handle. Now—what's the word, pard?"

"I can't coax or scold you off, Silky!"

"You could, if any man, but it's written, Billy! I'm in to stay."

"All right. What's the lay-out, then?"

"Do you think you could help me to a private confab with this John Edgar? Could you draw him away from that woman of his, reckon?"

"She's at the hotel. He's more apt to be going the rounds, if he hasn't found a seat at Mason's. He's a sport—curse him!"

"If he's at Mason's, you ought to be able to draw him outside. Suppose you take a ramble over that way? No time like the present, you know! I've been slow to start, but now I'm in, I'm all business!"

Billy La Rue leaned forward until their faces almost touched. The gloom of evening was not so great but that he could read those gray eyes, and what he saw in their depths caused him to give over trying to shake Silky Steele's resolution, and springing to his feet, he said:

"You'll go with me, of course?"

"I'll keep an eye on you, Billy, but until the game is fairly under headway, we're strangers, you understand? I'm Tom Johnson, now, but if any one was to see us in company, they might fall to thinking."

"You're right, as usual, Silky. I'll go to Mason's, first. If our man isn't there, I'll try the hotel."

Leaving the burro to take care of himself for the present, Silky Steele followed after Billy La Rue, keeping the little sport well in sight, yet acting so that none who might chance to observe them would have any suspicion that they were moving in concert.

"Mason's" was the principal gambling establishment in Camp Climax, and, like all the others of that business, "ran wide open." All were at liberty to enter, whether for play or simple amusement, the sole restriction being quiet and order.

Entering this establishment, Billy La Rue instantly saw that his guess had been correct: John Edgar, the ex-cowboy, was seated at a round table, playing poker with several of the acquaintances he had formed since his arrival at Camp Climax.

La Rue quietly took his stand back of Edgar, too thoughtful a gambler to break in upon a man's play. He was all the more willing to obey this unwritten law, however, as he saw that, early though the evening was, luck had been running contrary to the wishes of the ex-cowboy, and he had but a few chips left of the "table stakes" with which that game had begun.

Fate was against Edgar, and in favor of the man watching and waiting. One more turn settled the matter, and, with a muttered curse, John Edgar abruptly pushed his chair back, saying:

"That lets me out for this evening, gentlemen. See you again, when I've picked up a fresh hunk of luck!"

As he rose to his feet, Billy La Rue smilingly bowed, then whispered in guarded tones:

"I'd like to have a few words in private with you, sir, if you're not afraid to trust yourself with a stranger."

"Why should I be afraid?" almost harshly demanded Edgar, one hand mechanically touching the revolver at his hip.

"No reason at all, sir," bowed the polite little sport, his smile even more bland than usual. "You're big enough to eat me at a mouthful, of course. So—will you oblige me with a word, outside?"

"A thousand, if you can show cause for asking! Lead the way, and I'll keep pace to your tune, never fear!"

In both tone and manner Edgar showed a perfect willingness to engage in a quarrel, if such was sought, but La Rue was simply bent on playing into the hand of his partner, and refused to take offense.

The two men left the building together, La Rue catching sight of the disguised gambler and leading the ex-cowboy directly toward that quarter, at the same time saying:

"The word I wished to give you, Mr. Edgar, is just this: permit me to introduce you to Thomas Johnson, Esquire!"

As he uttered those words, he dropped the arm of his man, stepping apart far enough to easily command both men as they stood face to face, Edgar with hand at waist, but the fictitious Johnson with his extended in friendly greeting.

"Mighty glad fer to meet ye, Johnny! Shake!"

"I don't know you, sir. What do you want of me?"

"Fu'st, to ax ye a question. Hev ye found Basil Imroy yet?"

"What the deuce do you mean by—if this is a trick to trap me, I'll make it hot for you both!" exclaimed the ex-cowboy, springing back a pace, drawing a revolver as he did so, glaring suspiciously first at one and then at the other of the two men.

"It's no trick, so far as I'm concerned, Mr. Edgar," quietly said Billy La Rue, making no attempt to draw a weapon. "This gentleman said he had urgent reasons for meeting you for a word in private, and I did what I could to bring you together."

"What do you want of me, then?" sternly demanded Edgar, nodding toward that ragged, disreputable-looking fellow.

"Didn't I say it plain 'nough, boss? Then I'll repeat it all over. Hev ye ketched on to Basil Imroy yet?"

"And I repeat: what the deuce do you mean?"

"That you're too white a man to be yelping for another dog!"

That was a perilously blunt speech to make to an armed man, but its very boldness caused John Edgar to hesitate before shooting.

He stood his ground, ready to meet or make an attack on either of the two men, who could hardly be friendly, judging from their words and actions.

"Do you mean that for an insult, sir?" he sternly demanded.

"Not unless you will have it that way, Edgar," quickly answered Slocum, now using his

natural voice, like one who feels all necessity for wearing a mask has vanished. "I've called you out here to talk business, and I hope to make you play white, now you've got out of that masked devil's grip!"

"You are— Hal I know you, Silky Steele!" Swift as thought his pistol came to a level, but the Stay-in Sport simply threw out his chest, tapping it with his empty hands as he coldly said:

"Shoot, and die of shame, John Edgar!"

In no other way could Silky Steele have restrained that shot. Finger was on trigger, and the pointed hammer was lifted under the pressure. Another pound more of contraction, and death surely would have claimed a victim!

Billy La Rue never moved. His arms were lightly folded across his chest, his white hands free from weapons. A thoroughbred sport, he left the game wholly in the hands of his partner, to whom it rightly belonged. If he lost, that was fate.

When he lost, then his hands would be free to chip in!

John Edgar hesitated, flashing a glance toward La Rue, then back his stern gaze passed to the Stay-in Sport. He was puzzled, and knew not what should be his next move.

"I don't—what game are you trying to put up on me, Slocum?" he asked, finally, that hammer lowering as his pressure slackened, but that muzzle still covering his adversary.

"No game at all, John Edgar," came the quiet response. "I'm simply trying to open your eyes to a game—a game so infernally nasty that I wonder your nostrils haven't already given you warning!"

"You mean—just what?"

"That you are permitting a devil to use you, as no honest or white man should be used."

"This from you, the outlaw whom all Climax is cursing!" sneeringly asked the ex-cowboy.

"That is part of the dirty game I alluded to, John, and you know it as well as I can tell you. You know that I'm not Major Nightmare. You know that Major Nightmare, by lying or some equally crooked means, won or forced you into playing his hand here in Climax. And yet, if you knew who he really is, you'd bite your tongue off, you'd roast your good right hand off, rather than play the cards he's shoved into your fist!"

"Wind is cheap, but—"

"Easy, Edgar! I know what sort of wind you've spent your time in blowing through Camp Climax, but I'm not here to pick a row with you on that account. Though you may not believe it, first-off, I'm here as your friend and well-wisher."

"Prove that, if you can, Silky Steele!"

"I think I am doing that same, Edgar. Almost any other man would have shot you at sight for—"

"Two can play at shooting, my lad!" his weapon ready.

"But you'll hardly shoot an unarmed man down, Johnny," came the cool, almost contemptuous retort. "But, business first, with your kind leave! I'm here to make a bargain, Edgar. Do me a favor, and I'll give you a fact! What say?"

"I'd rather hear you explain a little more clearly, Mr. Slocum."

"All right, Johnny! You agree to tell the straight story of Major Nightmare when the right time comes, and I'll show you Basil Imroy!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

DRIVING A BARGAIN.

JOHN EDGAR gave a surly growl that indicated anything but pleasure.

"Curse him! I wish I'd never even heard his name spoken!"

"Do you reckon you'll ever hear the last of that name, unless you give a certain friend of yours a chance to wipe both name and owner off the board, Johnny? If she—"

"Careful, you!"

"That's just what I am, pardner: heap sight more careful than you have been, up to date. I'm so careful that I've taken the trouble to look you up before getting supper, though my inner man has been howling for grub this many an hour gone by! So careful that, where almost any other man would have come to town, breathing fire and brimstone against all those who have been taking his good name in vain, I'm begging one of those slanderers to do himself a favor, by way of reward!"

"If you reckon to turn it all into a joke, sir—"

"I'd sooner laugh than weep, any day, Johnny, but I must confess I fail to see anything like a joke in what I'm saying. I mean it for sober business. I make you a business proposition. Tell the simple truth, instead of the elaborate lies with which Major Nightmare has primed you, and, in my turn, I'll enable you to find the man whom your wife has been hunting so hotly. Does that sound much like a joke?"

Edgar made no immediate reply. Though Silky Steele spoke so smoothly, just as though an entire change of base might be made without

an effort, the ex-cowboy could not see it in the same light.

There was sufficient light for the Stay-in Sport to note that troubled look, and stepping forward until he could place a hand on the other's shoulder, he spoke with greater gravity:

"Look here, old fellow! I'm not trying to crowd you too fast. I'm willing to do the square thing by you. If you don't like to decide it off-hand, on your own hook, take me to your rooms, and let the lady do the deciding for both of us. Dare you make that bargain with me?"

"What do you know about—"

"I know enough to keep my end up if it comes to a racket, be sure! I'd rather fight twenty men than one woman, but—those who are not on my side in this game are surely against me!"

"If you mean that for a threat—"

"Merely a warning, friend. You're old enough to appreciate it. Show that you can appreciate it, by accepting the proposal as freely as I have made it. Take me there, and let her decide for us both!"

"I'll do it!" impulsively decided the ex-cowboy. "Come! But mind you, Silky: try to raise a row, or make use of a single word that can annoy a lady, and I'll kill you like a dog!"

Through all this Billy La Rue had remained a silent if watchful witness, but now he bluntly interposed.

"You're not such a fool, Silky! You're not going to run your head in where they can double-bank you! Don't forget how they've been back-capping you ever since they struck Climax!"

"That's all right, Billy. A bargain is a bargain, and John Edgar isn't a man to play double. If he'll take me, be sure I'm going along."

"Then I'd be the fool, to waste more wind on you!" almost viciously snapped the little sport. "If Satan stood in your road, you'd try to buck him out of it, rather than dodge to either side! But—one word to you, Mr. Edgar: if harm comes to my friend through his folly, I'll call you to account!"

"No harm will or can come, so friend Edgar needn't take the trouble to answer you, Billy," quickly interposed Slocum. "You haven't forgotten what we talked over, a bit ago. If you'll just look over the list for me, pard, 'twill both save me trouble, and keep you from fighting windmills. See?"

Without giving La Rue a chance to raise further objections, Silky Steele slipped a hand through an arm of the ex-cowboy, moving away in the direction of the principal hotel. Edgar hung back a bit, but the Stay-in Sport would not have it that way.

"It's the quickest way to clear up an ugly muddle, Johnny, and you can't say I'm not giving you long enough odds. Two against one, and half of that pair a woman! If I didn't know I had gospel truth to back me up, pardner, I'd throw up my hand without even skinning it!"

John Edgar was not to be drawn into a discussion, or even a conversation. While he felt that Steele Slocum had right on his side, he was by no means so sure Carmen would take that view of the matter.

Leaving Silky Steele in the dimly-lighted corridor of the hotel, he gained admission to the chamber where Carmen was waiting, closing the door after him.

"If all women were like her!" murmured Silky, a smile coming into his metamorphosed face as he thought of "Injun Molly" by way of contrast. "If they were, what a world! But—spit-cat or not, I'm bound to have a chat with the beauty before I leave this ranch!"

Fortunately, perhaps, that interview was granted by Carmen without serious trouble or much delay: barely long enough for John Edgar to partially explain what had passed between the two men down-town.

"You can come in," rather sulkily muttered the husband, as he opened the door barely wide enough to permit that ragged figure to slip inside. "This is my wife, and she—"

"You can talk Spanish, señor?" hastily interposed Carmen, her rare dark eyes swiftly sweeping over that form, then lingering upon that beard-masked face.

"I understand it better than I can talk it, señora, but—"

"Good! I talk my tongue, you talk yours! Now—where is that son of a million devils?"

That little room was rather bare of accommodations. Carmen was seated on the edge of the hard, narrow bed. Edgar had appropriated the one wooden-seated chair, and now seemed guarding the closed door. Silky Steele did not see his way clear to risking his weight upon the frail wash-stand, so he squatted on his heels, with back braced against the unpainted wooden partition.

"I say, señora," with a deprecatory wave of his ragged felt hat. "Don't knock a fellow out of the game with your first bluff!"

"You mean—what does he mean, Juan?"

"To drive a bargain, I reckon," was the sour explanation.

"Rather coarse, but truthful, senora," nodded the Stay-in Sport, as those dark eyes flashed back to his begrimed face. "I know what you'd give a pretty penny to discover. If I was a cavalier, such as graces your sunny land, of course I'd beg you to take all without giving back. But—I wasn't built that way, and for information I expect an equal measure of unadulterated truth. *Sabe?*"

Again did Carmen glance toward her husband for enlightenment, and Silky Steele smothered a grim little chuckle as he saw himself in a fair way to gain the first point he had thought to carry; with Edgar as spokesman on the other side, he believed the advantage would lie with him!

"He means that we must make a bargain first," repeated the ex-cowboy. "Talk out in plain terms, can't you, man?"

"All right, Johnny," shifting his position a bit to suit. "I'll sling the facts at you, and you can polish 'em up a bit for madame. And as a starter—I'm not Major Nightmare, and you both know it!"

"We've declared you were, time and time over," sulkily retorted Edgar. "How are we to swallow our own words?"

"I'll agree to furnish the butter for greasing the ways, pardner. What easier than to declare that it was but part of a put-up job to trap the real rascal? Wouldn't that win you praise, rather than ugly sneers? Looks that way to me, Johnny!"

"Why should we do that?" sharply demanded Carmen.

"Well, I might begin a lecture on the glorious beauties of undying truth, and all that; but maybe I'd better not! Thanks, Johnny! I thought pretty much that way of my own accord. So—here's reasons!"

"Why should you serve that devil, when he's simply using you to pull his chestnuts out of the fire? Why keep faith with him, when he's been lying to you from the send-off? He never intended to show you the game you hunt, because—"

"You don't mean to hint that he's Basil Imroy?" almost fiercely broke in Edgar.

"Who? Major Nightmare?" with an echo of blank amazement in his tones, that did more to blind the couple than his words could. "Well, hardly! But he knows the man, and would sell a thousand such friends as you, rather than bring harm to his pard!"

"You know that devil then, señor?" almost breathlessly demanded Carmen, one hand gripping the haft of the knife she wore in her bosom.

"Maybe yes, maybe no. If I agree to point him out to you both, will you agree to tell the plain truth of this ugly affair? Will you take back your false charges against me, and help me convict the real Major Nightmare?"

"Is Imroy here in Camp Climax?"

"You haven't been able to meet up with him, have you, Johnny?" in turn asked the Stay-in Sport. "I reckoned not! Well, if he isn't here just at present, I know where to look for him, when the time comes. One other man knows him, but I hardly think he'll offer you as clean terms as I hold forth."

"You mean Major Nightmare?"

"Precisely! He knows Imroy, but their interests are so closely bound together that he'd just as soon think of putting the rope around his own throat as he would of pointing out that pard to you or the senora, yonder. Mind you, sir, I'm not talking at random. I stand ready to prove every word I utter, if you two will agree to do your part."

"Just what is it you want us to do?"

"To tell the plain truth about this road-agent business when the right time comes. I know that you can do this without endangering your own safety. I know that Major Nightmare's Bad Dreams picked you up in the way of business, and only refrained from pinching you because he fancied he could make more out of you another way."

"How did you learn so much?"

"Well, I happened to be taking notes back yonder, when the gallant major was trying his charms on—"

"Careful, sir!"

"Careful goes! The lady has nothing to be ashamed of; just the contrary," in earnest tones. "Though that old goat held you both in his power, she proudly resented his insults."

"'Tis truth he speaks, Juan," murmured Carmen, as her eyes sought those of her husband. "And—if this señor can bring me face to face with that son of the devil, why not—"

"If we promise, on our part, will you swear to show us Basil Imroy?" asked Edgar, rising to his feet in his earnestness.

"I promise to do just that!" came the prompt response.

"It is enough!" cried Carmen, also rising, and catching their hands, to unite them with her own. "We are friends and allies now!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

STRIKING WHILE THE IRON IS HOT.

STEELE SLOCUM was proud of the victory he had won so much more easily than he had dared

hope, and he showed as much in his face and manner. Never man gave a warmer, more joyous grip than he, just then.

"I'm glad, but not altogether on my own account," he said, in tones the sincerity of which could not be doubted. "You are both too white, too honest, too true-hearted to be led by the nose by such a dastardly scoundrel as Major Nightmare! But—let's get back to business."

"Just what I was about to propose, pardner," said Edgar. "I only took sides with that devil to save my wife, and now you can't set the tune too lively for my liking."

"There'll be dancing enough, never fear, pardner. But we've got to tune up before we can play in note. Didn't Major Nightmare tell you who you could trust to back you up, here in Climax?"

"I'd give a pretty to know how you tumbled to the whole trick so exactly!" ejaculated the amazed cowboy.

"Partly through making good use of my ears, but more through reasoning it out," pleasantly replied the Stay-in Sport. "Then I didn't miss this part of my guess?"

"No. He told me to look up Judge Aaron Ramsey, to start with. Then to call on Art. Ricord—you know him, of course?"

"I've played many a game of poker with him, yes."

"And if I needed a man to do dirty work, I was to use Big Elephant."

"I know him, too," with a low chuckle, as he thought of his last seance with Briggs Oliphant. "I reckon I'd like a bit of a chat with that fellow, if it could be brought about without too much trouble. I fancy he'd squeal like a pig under a gate, if rightly pinched."

"Shall I round him up for you, pardner?"

"Would you do that?"

"Why not?" came the instant response. "I'm in on your side, now, for her sake, and anything that I can do, I'm more than willing!"

"'Tis so, señor," said Carmen, her rich beauty all aglow with animation. "Juan will serve thee, since thou hast promised to bring me face to face with that son of Satan!"

"Well, I've heard say there's nothing like striking while the iron is hot, and if you don't mind, pardner, we'll give the Elephant a whirl, just for luck!"

Carmen caused a little delay by her wish to bear them company, to share in the play, but a few plain arguments convinced her that this was an impracticable wish. She consented to remain behind, after exacting a pledge that nothing should be kept hidden from her, and that John should return to relieve her suspense as quickly as might be.

Taking their leave of Carmen, the two men passed down-stairs and out under the stars. Almost the first thing, Silky Steele caught sight of a slender figure lurking in the deeper shadows opposite, and a low, pleased chuckle called Edgar's notice that way.

"You see, pardner, I'm not altogether without true and reliable friends," said the Stay-in Sport. "If we had concluded to quarrel in place of agreeing, up yonder, Billy boy would have been on hand to chip in for all he's worth! It's well worth living, just to know such a man!"

"I'd much rather you hadn't—but it can't be helped now!"

"Don't you borrow trouble about Billy, John. If I ask him to forget all he's heard or seen, be sure he'll blot it out of his memory, and never stop to ask why I want it that way. But now—which way?"

"You want me to draw out and round-up Big Elephant?"

"If you can, without too much trouble."

"No trouble at all! He's one of Major Nightmare's men, and when I gave him the grip that devil taught me, he put himself entirely at my service. He is waiting for work, and I was to find him at the El Dorado, at any hour of the day or night. He's waiting there now, beyond a doubt. The only thing lacking is—what shall I do with him?"

"The old gang will be there, of course. Can you draw him away from there without any of the gang following?"

"I reckon. If I can't, then Elephant will go back on the grip, and you can guess how much chance there is of his daring to do that!"

"Little enough! Briggsy is a cur from 'way back, and he'd die of scare, to just think of getting such a fellow as the major down on his back!"

"You've known him longer than I have, but our estimate fays in to perfection. All right! I'm to cut out and round-up Oliphant. Where do you want him driven to?"

"Out of town. Say to the north. He can bellow worse than a mad bull when he gets scared, and we don't need a big audience."

"All right. Shall I go for him right off?"

Silky Steele hesitated a bit before replying, then one hand pressed that portion of his front directly above his belt, and he said:

"Well, can't you put in an hour, without getting hot under the collar? I haven't had a bite since last night, and I'm hungry as a wolf! It may take time and talking to turn Elephant wrong side out, and I'd feel better able to stand

the strain if I had a bit of grub to lean back on. Still, if you—"

"You're foreman, I'm only a hand. An hour goes, and then I'll run the Elephant out at the north end. Will that serve?"

"Couldn't be better! You're white, Johnny!" ejaculated the Stay-in Sport, gripping that hand and shaking it cordially.

"I'm working for my wife," was the simple response, then the two men separated, John Edgar going toward the Eldorado, Silky Steele making his way down-town until that tall form was lost sight of, when he turned aside into a waste place, to sound a peculiar, low, quavering whistle.

A rapid fall of light footsteps, then a familiar voice came to his ears, with the half-petulant words:

"That's a waste of wind, Silky! You knew I was on your track."

"Don't get your back up, Billy, or I'll have to climb it!"

"Of course! You're playing just such fool' tricks this blessed night! What's the next caper, Silky?"

"More foolery, of course!" mocked Slocum, with a low, gratified chuckle, as he cast a keen glance around them. "I don't reckon there's any other cranks keeping an eye on my movements to-night, Billy, so we'll just take a lop-down here, and I'll confess just how silly I've been."

With a sniff of disgust, the dapper little sport imitated the example set by the other gambler, who seemed in no especial haste to begin the promised confession. It was seldom that he caught the usually smooth-tempered sport in such a stew, and he could not break the spell all at once.

After a bit more chaffing, however, Silky Steele got down to sober business, giving La Rue a clear idea of what had passed between himself and the Edgars, man and wife. And as he listened, the little gambler gradually lost his irritability and finally came out with the honest admission that Slocum had fairly bested him.

"I really reckoned you were playing the ass, Silky, and I would have lain long odds that I would have to chip in before you could pull out of the game! Now—what are we waiting for?"

"What do you think of it, Billy?" asked Slocum, his tones betraying a certain degree of irresolution, in strong contrast to his recent bold convictions.

"You mean about that decoy-duck of yours?"

"Yes. Think he's playing square?"

"You're the best judge as to that, of course. You saw and heard him. You haven't forgotten how to read across the board, have you, Silky?"

"I don't think so, and yet—it's mighty big stakes I'm playing for, Billy! Bigger than you have any idea of, as yet, though I mean to show you my hand in good time. So—I'll run no long chances!" with sudden determination.

"Which means?"

"That I'd rather have you play shadow a little longer, Billy. With you to chip, if need be, we'll be even; two on a side, if the fellow is really thinking of springing a trap on us."

"Unless he sends out part of the old gang to lie in wait for us," purred La Rue, actually seeming to find pleasure in that grim fancy. "After all, Silky, you're not quite perfect, for all!"

"I'll take lessons from you, when we've spare time, master," meekly murmured the Stay-in Sport, rising to his feet. "Don't you reckon we might as well be moving, Billy?"

"Your hour isn't up yet, Silky."

"What's the matter with spending the rest of it near the El Dorado then? If they are putting up a plant on me, maybe we can witness the preliminary process."

There was wisdom in this idea, and La Rue was gracious enough to admit as much; then the two sports passed quietly along through the scattering camp, to finally pause where they could keep an eye on the movements of any persons leaving the rude saloon.

While waiting there, an agreement was reached by the pards. Billy La Rue was to dog the Stay-in Sport, even as he intended to dog John Edgar and Big Elephant, should the ex-cowboy succeed in his work of decoying the rough alone out of town.

"You're not to chip in unless I call, understand, Billy?"

"All right. If everything works smoothly, I'll never become visible to any of you. But—I'll chip, if the game grows too hot!"

"Of course, for—look yonder!" pointing toward a tall figure which just then showed itself to his keen gaze, where the shadows lay less dense. "Yonder is Johnny, now!"

"Waiting for you to show up, I reckon. What next?"

"For you, to lie low. For me, to join Johnny and find out if the trick is ready to be turned."

"Keep your eyes skinned, then, pardner!"

"You bet I will! Reckon it's all on the square, but I'm running no risks. I'm in this game to win!"

Waiting until La Rue reeled back a few paces.

so as to give no possible chance for discovery, Silky Steele moved quickly forward, to be observed by that tall figure almost immediately.

That was proved by the prompt manner in which he stepped forward to meet him, and Slocum quickly saw that he had made no error; it was indeed John Edgar.

"Well, how goes it, pardner?" whispered the Stay-in Sport, with a slight nod toward the saloon. "He's in yonder!"

"Safe enough," came the prompt response. "I made sure of that, then hung around to cut him off in case he should try to pull out before your hour was up. Are you ready for him, pardner?"

"Yes. I'm loaded with enough grub to stay by me for an hour or so. I didn't dare wait for a full cargo. You are ready, of course?"

"You want me to take him out of town, to the north. I'll do that, but I've been thinking, and—swear you'll spare his life, or I'll throw up the contract, even so late!"

"His life is safe, pardner. I only want a bit of his tongue!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

TRAINING THE BIG ELEPHANT.

By this time Edgar was growing accustomed to the airy, off-hand style of the Stay-in Sport, and he required no further assurance to remove the scruples which thought and waiting had brought to his mind.

"That is all I ask for, sir. I know the fellow richly deserves punishment, but I'm hardly saintly enough to be the one to toll him to his death."

"And as a hunk of cold meat Oliphant would be of precious little use to me, Johnny! I couldn't eat him, though the dread of being called a cannibal wouldn't find birth! Stuffing wouldn't keep him from smelling to high heaven, while as a mummy—No, thanks! Give me Briggs alive, or give me a heap sight more room, with the wind in my favor!"

"You didn't fill a bottle with what you had left over, Silky?" asked his recently-won ally, with a light sneer in his tones.

"Meaning to insinuate that I'm primed, Johnny? I didn't think it of you, but—I'm but-toned, and my mouth is shaped like a clam from this moment on."

John Edgar cast a keen glance around them, then spoke again:

"I rather expected to see the little sport with you, pardner. Has he pulled out of the game for good?"

"Did you really want him to chip?"

"I'm not caring as to that. Just so he understands that there is to be no killing in this game. Will you promise for him, as well, Silky?"

"Of course, unless there should be an attempt to deal crooked on the other side of the board. You understand that, of course, Johnny?"

"Of course. I'm playing square, and I believe that you mean to do the same. Now—Shall I round him up?"

"When you get a good ready, yes. I'll be on hand, though you mayn't see me when you bring him out. Take him north, clear of town, and I'll answer for the rest of it."

Giving a nod in token of full comprehension, John Edgar parted company with the Stay-in Sport, crossing over to the El Dorado, pushing open the rudely-made door, and pausing on the threshold for an instant to flash a gaze over the gathering inside.

Hop Sing Di, one of the extremely few Celestials who have ever found more than toleration in mining-camps, was at his customary station behind the bar.

Nearly a dozen rough-clad, rougher-faced fellows were drinking and playing cards at the little tables secured to the floor along the side and end of the room.

Prominent among these was the big form of Briggs Oliphant, his slouched hat and bristling beard unable to mask his cuts and bruises, relics of that brief but lively fight with the Stay-in Sport.

These rainbow colors by no means added to his natural beauty, but Big Elephant retained the unimpaired use of his eyesight, and John Edgar had barely pushed the door open before he was seen and recognized.

A quick yet careless movement of one hand gave the signal, and as Oliphant pushed his chair back, Edgar turned to leave, like one who was in quest of a man, and had failed to find him in that company.

"You wanted me, I reckon, boss?" huskily muttered Big Elephant as, a few moments later, he joined that tall figure under the stars.

"Yes, I wanted you, or I'd hardly have given the sign. You didn't let on to any of those other fellows, did you?"

"Never a let on! What's wantin'? He hain't come back, hes he?"

"Meaning Silky Steele?"

"Counsel Dug-gun him fer a— Did you say he'd come back?"

"No, I didn't say he'd come, but I do say that the boss has come, and I'm to take you to where he's waiting. You'll go, of course?"

"Ketch me holdin' back when he's snappin' the cracker?" grimly chuckled the tough.

"When you've knowed him long's I hev, pard-

ner, you won't waste wind axin' sech fool' questions."

"I hope to know him better, but that don't count. I'm going; come!"

John Edgar led the way at a brisk pace, feeling assured that Silky Steele would be able to spring his trap whenever he felt so inclined. Big Elephant, never for a moment suspecting treachery, kept pace with his guide, now and then grunting forth a remark which needs no record here.

When the town was left fairly behind them, and they had gained a retired portion of the slightly irregular tract of ground lying between Camp Climax and the hills, Edgar slackened his pace, casting a keen glance around them as he spoke, clearly:

"As near as I could make out, it was about here the boss told me to join him. But if I've made a mistake—"

"I'll never tell you of it!" came a voice, and then the disguised gambler stepped briskly forward toward the pair, while another, slighter and shorter in shape, put in an appearance directly opposite.

That was an unfortunate move, if the Stay-in Sport counted on making Big Elephant regard him as Major Nightmare, for the tough almost instantly recognized the little gambler, and with that as a cue, he at once jumped at the whole truth.

"Silky, by —!" he exploded, jerking forth a revolver as he sprung back a pace. "You've tricked me, but I'll —"

He had time for no more, though few men in Camp Climax could talk faster or work a gun more rapidly than Briggs Oliphant. But now, as once before, he had to deal with a master, and before he could lift hammer or draw trigger, Silky Steele was upon him, striking the pistol from his grip, giving a lock and a wrench that sent the black-bearded giant headlong to the ground, Slocum adding his weight to the fall.

"I'm running this deal!" the Stay-in Sport cried, by way of warning to his allies. "Out comes your fangs, Olly, if I take your head with 'em!"

Half-stunned by that fall, Oliphant was not nearly a match for the athletic gambler, and Silky Steele quickly tore away his belt of arms, giving them a swing that landed all at the feet of Billy La Rue.

"Take charge, pardner!" called out the sport, then drawing back and easily rising to his feet. "Get up, Elephant! This is your working hour, and your trainer is on deck! Must I help you?"

Oliphant slowly, heavily obeyed. He had been severely wrenched before he went down before the sport, and his fall had been a heavy one. Still, Silky Steele shrewdly suspected that he was not hurt nearly so badly as he tried to make appear, and despite his seeming carelessness, he kept on the keen alert.

"I didn't—hull gang onto one pore devil!" huskily mumbled the cowed ruffian, flashing a venomous glare toward the one who had decoyed him into the power of the man whom he dreaded and feared above all others.

"Oh, you're not so badly hurt, Briggs, since you can lie just as smoothly as ever," chuckled the Stay-in Sport, as he faced the giant.

"What've I done fer to be misused this-away?"

"It isn't so much what you've done, as what you've tried to do, my overgrown kid! Now, open your ears for your first lesson, Big Elephant."

"You're a liar, for you tried to make Climax believe that I was a cowardly whelp, Major Nightmare! You are a coward, for you struck at the back of a white man who you knew wasn't near enough to defend himself from your slanderous attacks."

"You are a fraud, for you have filled the town with foul wind, swearing that you'd just everlastingly chaw me up if I ever dared show my face in this section again. Now—make your boasts good, Briggs Oliphant, or I'll fit you for planting!"

As he uttered those last words, in his grimmest, hardest tones, Silky Steele dropped a knife at the feet of the half-stunned giant in such a manner that the weapon stood up in the hard ground. And, armed with its mate, the Stay-in Sport stood on guard, ready for the combat.

The rising moon aided the twinkling stars in lending light enough for such a duel, and Silky Steele laughed tauntingly as he caught the venomous flash from those blackened eyes.

"Must I take a quirt to your back, Oliphant? I give you a chance for your life and liberty. There's a knife: grip it, and if you can best your master, you're free to go when and where you choose. But—you've got to kill me, or I'll kill you!"

"Ef I had a show to—" quaveringly muttered the tough, plainly longing to grip that weapon, yet fearing to act on his impulse.

"Swear that you'll stand neutral, pards!" sharply demanded Slocum, and the oath came without an instant's hesitation.

Silky Steele reached out with his empty hand, slapping Oliphant on each cheek with force sufficient to bring the red blood to that blanched

surface. And, with a muffled snarl, the giant snatched up that weapon, making a furious attack upon his master.

For master the Stay-in Sport easily proved himself, meeting that assault with an ease and skill which quickly set at rest the doubts which John Edgar felt as to the possible outcome; as for Billy La Rue, the smile of confidence had long since come to his womanish lips.

Silky Steele stood on the defensive barely long enough to give his bulky adversary a gleam of hope and confidence in his own skill, then he began to press the giant steadily, keeping an unbroken guard for his own person, yet time and again sending his glittering blade gliding past that of the big rough, to slit cloth or nip flesh.

"Brace up, Elephant!" he mocked, in clear yet easy tones, showing how slightly that struggle was affecting him, in marked contrast with the labored breathing of his adversary. "I offered you a chance, but you're throwing it away. I'll do better: come and take it!"

He drew back his hand, throwing his bosom open to a death-stroke!

Vicious as a copperhead in August, Oliphant lunged for that unguarded heart, but—with a clish and a grating, his blade was wrenched from his hand and hurled yards away through the moonlight! A hand of steel gripped his throat, its mate bringing blade close to his terror-stricken eyes, a stern voice saying:

"Your life is forfeit, Briggs Oliphant! Never a man in all Climax would fault me for claiming what I have won! But—talk white, and I'll let you run until the common hangman takes his dues!"

Silky Steele relaxed his grasp, and drew back, his armed hand dropping to his side. Still, he was so near that any attempt at flight on the part of the cowed ruffian would be worse than idle.

"I don't—I never—"

"Steady, Big Elephant!" came that warning voice. "I've taken your training in hand, and I'll make a success of it, or I'll break your back in seventeen pieces! Now—who's the real Major Nightmare?"

"I don't—I never knowed who he was, ef you hain't—"

"Steady, twice! Tell the naked truth, Oliphant, or I'll hand you over to the Climax boys as one of the Bad Dreams!"

"That's a lie, but—what ye want me to say?" sulkily muttered the big fellow, shrinking from that fiery gaze, yet totally unable to flee.

"A good many things, old fellow, but to begin with—who was it that shot Sandy McIntosh?"

Briggs Oliphant plainly did not anticipate that question, and he gave a start which almost convinced the shrewd gambler that he had struck the right chord at last!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FAST BIND, FAST FIND.

"I'm standing your friend when I warn you that lies are played out, Oliphant," coldly added the Stay-in Sport. "You know who sent that arrow through the throat of the prospector, and you know why it was done. That is one of the points I've brought you out here to clear up."

"I don't know, boss, but ef—What'll I git fer tellin'?"

"I'll tell you what you'll not get: the rope, Elephant! It's talk white, or pull hemp with you, and though you were born a fool, surely you ought to see which offers the best reward. So—who shot Sandy?"

"I jest heard— You'll let me go free ef I tell?"

"I'll set what answers as your soul, free, Briggs, if you don't confess. Talk out, or—"

"Shorely, gents, you won't stan' by an' see a pore devil treated wuss'n ary houn'-dog?" pleaded the cornered knave, flashing a glance over Billy La Rue, then resting his gaze upon John Edgar. "You won't treat a pardner so infernally low-down, anyhow!"

"You are no pardner of mine, Big Elephant," coldly retorted the ex-cowboy. "If you can save your life by talking white, you'd better set your tongue to wagging as this gentleman directs."

"That's what's the matter with Briggs!" chimed in La Rue. "You went into the game with your eyes open, old man, and it's too late to draw down when your bluff is called. Show your hand, or give up the pot."

"That means your life, Oliphant," significantly added the Stay-in Sport. "I'm making you a mighty sight fairer offer than you deserve, but I'm hungrier for the big ducks than for such small fry as you!"

"Ef I tell all I know, you'll let me run?" persisted Oliphant.

Silky Steele put up his knife, to replace it with a revolver. He raised the hammer with his thumb, and brought the weapon to a level.

"Business, old man! Talk straight, or I'll begin the dance by spilling that right elbow of yours! I'll not kill you outright, for that would be to seal your lips, while I want them to open wide. Now, talk!"

"It's a turrible tough deal you're crowdin'

onto a pore devil," sulkily mumbled the giant. "But I'll knuckle. What comes fu'st?"

"Who shot Sandy McIntosh?"

"I can't say for dead sure, boss, but I've hearn tell, since that bit of a racket we hed, that Art. Ricord done the job!"

"The gambler who holds forth at Mason's, you mean?"

Big Elephant nodded assent. He did not deem a more explicit answer necessary, for Silky Steele surely knew the bearer of that name.

But John Edgar was not so easily satisfied. A sharp ejaculation broke from his lips, and as a ray of light seemed to flash across his brain, he demanded:

"Is Ricord Major Nightmare, Oliphant?"

The big fellow gave a start of surprise, but quickly replied:

"No! What made you reckon that way?"

Edgar drew a long breath of relief, for he could not doubt the sincerity of that reply; whether true or not, Briggs Oliphant was honest in making that assertion.

If Arthur Ricord was Major Nightmare, then the ex-cowboy feared his hopes were gone astray, for he could not reconcile the face he had seen across the poker-table with that described by Carmen, as her recollection of Hernando Bernal, the man who carried off her sister, Rosina.

"You say you heard this; from whose lips?" asked Slocum.

Oliphant hesitated, but a significant motion with that pistol made him come to time once more, and he muttered:

"He let it drap, but I don't reckon he jestly knowed how much he s'posed his hand, boss. It come 'long o' his wantin' me to help him git 'nother grip onto Cracked Peter, so he could pinch him 'bout that gold-mine o' his'n."

"So Ricord shot Sandy! How did he get hold of that arrow?"

"I giv' it to him," reluctantly.

"You stole it from Injun Molly, then?"

"No I didn't, nuther! I was out on a leetle hunt in the hills, an' I come on a dead deer what she'd shot, to hev git away. I tuck the arer, but I didn't mean no sech harm as come of it, boss! An' then Art. Ricord tuck it, as a sort o' queeriosity, he said. An' so—waal, it come 'long o' my knowin' he hed the arer, that I ketched onto the way it was done, ye see."

"I trust you are talking straight, for your own sake, Elephant," the Stay-in Sport said, gravely. "Of course poor Sandy has got to be avenged, and if you can fasten the crime on Ricord, so much the better for your neck!"

"But—I wouldn't dast! It'd be my death ef I did, boss!"

"Would it come any easier to hang for his crime, old man? But I'm hardly satisfied with your statement. Unless you knew that Sandy was to be murdered, how do you account for what followed after he was found shot? You were playing a part, and I know it!"

"So I was, boss, but, fer all that, it hit me mighty tough when I come to see how the game opened," said Oliphant, with real or admirably counterfeited regret. "You see, it was jest this way: Cracked Peter hed a find, which the smartest o' us all couldn't never ketch onto, though we tried all we knowed, times 'thout countin'! An' so—Art. Ricord, he 'lowed to me that ef we could git the boys red-hot 'g'inst them two low-down critters, an' we was to chip in to sorter easy 'em over the rifles, mebber we mought be able fer to skeer the secret out o' the old man. An' so—but I never knowed they was to be killin' done!"

"Of course you'd say so, Briggs, but—"

"I'll take my oath, boss!"

"Well, there's only one way out of it for you, old man, and that is to help bring all those who had a hand in the dirty game, to the bar of justice. You say Arthur Ricord was at the bottom of it; was he the only big toad in the puddle?"

"Waal, I reckon mebber the jedge knowed somethin' o' what was gwine on, too," reluctantly admitted the knave.

"Aaron Ramsey, eh? You really reckon he knew that Sandy was to be killed?"

"No, I don't go so fur's that, boss. I'm tellin' ye jest what I know fer a fact, not what mebber mought be, or mebber moughtn't be."

"In which you show your wisdom, Elephant! What makes you reckon the jedge was in the scheme, then?"

"Waal, he was 'long o' the sport when we talked it all over: how it'd be a good job ef we could skeer the crazy critter, ye mind."

"And he chipped in just at the right moment, I remember," said the Stay-in Sport, with a grimly-emphatic nod. "I knew he was hankerin' after the bonanza, but I really didn't think he'd step so far over the boundary-line!"

"I hain't sayin' he did, ye mind, boss!" eagerly interposed Oliphant. "Mebber he never knowed—"

"Well, we'll not discuss that point just at present," cut in Silky Steele, shaking off that tempor'ry air of indecision. "Now, how about Major Nightmare? You belong to his gang, of course?"

"You say as how I do, boss," mumbled Oliphant, sulkily.

"But what do you say?"

"That I hain't got nothin' to say!" with a flash of spirit. "You three critters hes tricked me ontel I can't 'fend myself. You've tuck 'way my tools, an' you hold me kivered with yours. I can't say you lie, 'thout reek o' hev'in' my roof raised, but—I kin say that I'll be double-durned ef I will say—so thar!"

"Good boy, Briggs!" crowed Billy La Rue. "He's not all dung-hill, pardner! Look out, or you'll feel his gaffs even yet!"

"You button up, Billy! And you, Briggs Oliphant, just attend to me a few moments longer. As you say, we've got you foul. Already you've admitted enough to hang you a dozen times over, if you were so unlucky as to have a neck for each noose the boys of Climax would be only too glad to produce."

"But—you said—"

"And I'm going to say it all over, with even greater distinctness, old man. If you will play white to the end: if you will tell a straight story from start to finish, and stick sacredly by the truth: then I'll agree on my part to protect you from all harm in the way of hanging by law or lynching by mob. Is that plain enough, Oliphant?"

"You mean that I'm to come out afore everybody, an' tell jest what I've told to you, this night?" demanded the ruffian, his face showing almost ghastly livid under the moonlight.

"I mean precisely that! Will you agree to do it?"

"They'd shet my wind too mighty quick, boss!"

"They'll have enough to do to look after their own wind. Still, you can take your choice, old man. I reckon we can turn the trick without your help, if we have to. Only—in that case, of course, you'll have to stand trial with the other rascals, Oliphant."

"It's mighty tough roots to chaw, boss, but I reckon I'll have to begin on your eend," moodily yielded the big fellow.

"Comfort yourself that no other sort of fodder would sustain your life so long, Elephant," significantly smiled the Stay-in Sport; then resuming his cold, stern demeanor, he added:

"Now about Major Nightmare. Who is he, Oliphant, when he doffs his road habit?"

"I don't know who he is, boss, nur I don't reckon they's ary one o' the outfit as does know that, 'ceptin' him own self!"

"Well, perhaps we can manage to spot the gentleman without your evidence, old man," and then the Stay-in Sport raised his pistol to a level, saying sternly: "Steady, Oliphant! Put both hands behind your back, and play you were a statue of patience!"

"But, boss, I hain't—"

"Hands back, I say, or off goes your roof! Now, Billy, do your part!"

La Rue was ready, though this was a point which had not been decided on beforehand. And almost before John Edgar could understand what was in view, Briggs Oliphant was in a fair way to be bound and gagged.

"I say, pardner, you promised—"

"To spare his life if you would decoy him out here: just so," the Stay-in Sport coolly admitted. "But I didn't say I'd turn him loose directly after pinching a confession out of him. That would be running entirely too much risk, as you ought to know, pardner!"

"Then you mean only to hold him prisoner, until we can trap the other rascals?" asked Edgar, with an air of relief.

"I'll never squeal, boss, ef you don't—"

"I'll go bail you'll keep a still tongue until the proper time comes for talking, Big Elephant," was the meaning interposition. "Of course you might be as good as a bail bond, but fast bind, fast find is a mighty good motto for a business man to live up to; and I'm all business until this trick is fairly turned!"

The deft insertion of a gag cut short all remonstrances from that quarter, and five minutes later the three men were marching Big Elephant to a secure hiding-place among the foot-hills.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WORDS WITH THE BARK ON.

JUDGE AARON RAMSEY was seated at the desk in his little office, putting some of his papers in order: a very disagreeable duty, one would think, from his sour looks and frequent growls of angry annoyance.

Just then he was looking vastly different from the bland, plausible, suave yet bluntly honest admixture of business man and sport which the better portion of Camp Climax was wont to look up to. Aaron was alone with his thoughts, and no longer deemed it necessary to wear a mask.

He began to suspect that he had been playing the fool, for one thing, and that was a crime beyond pardon in the decalogue of Judge Ramsey. A man who committed a blunder was the worst of sinners!

"And I—how many?" he growled, leaning back in his chair, pushing that thick underlip between his teeth and then gnawing at it hungrily.

More than he liked to count up, and he made

no such effort, just then. It was more agreeable, and fully as profitable, to curse those who had helped him fall into such ugly errors.

Although the judge knew nothing about that little stroke of business, this was the next evening after Briggs Oliphant took his lesson from the Stay-in Sport, and just when Ramsey was grinding that partnership curse between his teeth, the office door noiselessly swung ajar far enough for "Tom Johnson" to thrust his frowny pate inside the room, with his eyes on an exploring expedition.

Satisfied that the judge was alone, the seeming bummer crossed the threshold, closing the door behind him, letting the lock snap sharply as he turned the key in its wards.

That sound was enough to cause Aaron to face about, one hand seeking a weapon, while his tongue blurted forth:

"What the deuce do you mean, sir! How dare you—"

"Hope I hain't 'trudin', boss?" croaked Silky Steele in his huskiest tones, one empty palm turning toward the judge, his other hand bringing a remarkably business-like revolver to a level. "Flag o' truce, or a ticket to the bone-yard, jedge! Take yer choice, an' take it quick!"

"Who are you, and how dare you act so outrageously?"

"I'm me, an' 'me's' my daddy's kid afore I growed up! Jest now, jedge, I'm the man with the drop, an' ef you make me bu'st a ca'tridge, I'll go ye three to one in hunderds that I'll spile the mateliness o' them winkers o' yours!"

"If you mean murder or—"

"Ef I did, you wouldn't never 'a' knowed when I come down onto ye, jedge, an' that's what I'm givin' ye time to see. I'd pretty nigh as soon pull a pop on my ole mammy, as on you, jedge, but when a man moves out fer a gun the quickness o' you, jest back, a feller can't waste time axin' pardon an' sech-like doin's. Now, jedge, honest, kin he?"

By this time Ramsey was beginning to rally from that disagreeable shock, and to see that this glib-tongued caller would hardly have granted him so much play if he had meant actual mischief. He moved his hand away from his weapons, to ask:

"If you don't mean trouble, what is it you do want, then?"

"Fu'st, your word o' honor that ye won't try to ketch no snap-shots at a feller o' my bigness, ef he comes down to perlite hardpan."

"You have business with me, then?"

"Bet yer sweet life, jedge! An' ef 'tain't business what'll make the gums o' ye shed sap by the pint, then what's the matter with you playin' so hot fer the secret bonanza, eh?"

"What! you mean Cracked Bell's bonanza?" cried Ramsey, his face flushing hotly, his eyes beginning to glitter with newly-roused avarice.

"Waal, I'm a-shortin'! An' hyar you be, jedge, jest honin' fer to make a pepperbox out o' the gent as comes to offer you a snack rich 'nough fer to give ary one man the 'pepsy! And me a-axin'—"

"What do you know about that bonanza?"

"Fu'st, is it flag o' truce, jedge?"

"Of course! Put up your gun, and take that chair. Or, hold it, if you feel safer that way. All I want is to know what you're trying to play me for?"

"Not a sucker, anyway, jedge," drawled Tom Johnson, putting up his weapon and accepting the indicated seat. "You hain't that sort o' fish, to my guessin'. A sucker is too dug-gun slow, an' a sucker roots in the mud, as low down as it kin waller. But you—ef you can't keep on top o' water, whar the daintiest bits o' grub come fu'st, then I don't know! An' so—"

"Oh, curse your gab! Get down to business, man! What is it about Cracked Bell and his bonanza?"

"Waal, jedge, ef I stick to sober facts, you hain't gwine to kick too mighty hard, jest beca'se I'll mebber hev to spit out some words 'thout stoppin' to take the peel off!"

"What am I to understand by that?"

Tom Johnson heaved a sigh that was almost concentrated melancholy. Plain as speech, his face lamented the impetuosity that wouldn't let a man show his diplomacy, but that would rush him headlong at the leap, regardless of his neck or of his seat, for that matter.

"Waal, ef you will hev it all in a lump, jedge, I'm come hyar 'long o' Peter Bell an' his woman, fer to ax what'll you take to flop over on t'other side o' the fence! They know you're makin' things smell turrible sultry fer them, o' late days, an' we sorter reckoned mebber ef you was to git a finger into the yaller puddin', that you wouldn't keer 'bout makin' so much bother. See?"

Throughout this deliberate speech, Judge Ramsey gazed keenly and steadily into that beard-masked face, his own countenance growing colder and sterner as each sentence flowed from those lips. When the end came, he gravely asked:

"Do you fully understand what you are asking of me, sir? Do you know that, in the eye of the law, a partaker is considered as bad as the thief?"

"But—you hain't bin stealin' nothin', hev yo,

judge?" exploded his visitor, with exaggerated bewilderment in face and in voice.

"Of course not, sir! But you are inviting me to do something almost as wicked. Why, these people are actual outlaws! If not Major Nightmare himself, they are his allies! If not actually murderers, they surely supplied the weapon by which a valuable life was cut off in its prime! And you dare attempt to bribe me to help them cheat justice?"

"You're way off the trail, judge," coolly retorted his visitor. "I was talkin' of Peter Bell, an' you're spoutin' 'bout Art. Ricord, an' Big Elephant, an' Aaron Ramsey, which— *Steady, old man!*"

For a brief space the judge was held in amaze at that bold beginning, but as his own name was mentioned, he gave an angry curse, and attempted to grip a weapon: only to have the black muzzle of a cocked revolver thrust almost into his own face.

"Don't—don't murder me!" he gasped, shrinking away, but only to see that tube keep in line with his terror-wide eyes.

"Wouldn't do it fer less'n a dollar, judge, an' I'm turrible sure you're too dug-gun stingy fer to make sech a lib'ral offer as *that!*" equably retorted the seeming bummer, plainly enjoying his little circus. "Hol' up your paws, judge—*up high!* Now, see ef you kin star' up onto the hooft o' ye 'thout tumblin' over in 'he knees! Ye kin, fer a fact!"

Judge Ramsey, cowed by this ugly sequel to his attempted lecture on uprightness and moral integrity, obeyed like one in a waking dream. He did not even find a protest when he was marched across the office under that grim muzzle, to flatten his stomach against the bare wall. But as those hands began rapidly searching his person, the avarice which had been his curse through life, came to the surface once more in a few broken protests.

"Don't you worry, judge," coolly answered his captor, continuing his work all the same. "Ef you hed the mines o' Golcondy strung 'round your neck fer a charm, an' toted all the treasures o' old Peru into the pockets o' ye fer safe-keepin', never a one o' me would stoop so low as to let even the weentiest speck o' pay-dirt stick to the fingers o' him! An' I'm sayin' of that in your two ears, judge! Shell I take my affy-davy onto it, likewise?"

Judge Aaron groaned aloud. Despite that assertion of strict honesty, he felt that he was being despoiled by this glib-tongued impostor, and though he had no very great amount of money on his person, it was enough to give him exquisite torture at the bare thought of losing it.

Instead, the disguised sport simply made a bundle of all articles, after a keen glance at each bit of writing, in Ramsey's own handkerchief. Then, keeping possession of the weapons which he had found, he tossed the rest on the desk as he spoke again:

"Oblige me by resuming your seat, dear sir, now that I have extracted your teeth. I feared you might injure your own health by— Do you see a ghost, dear Aaron?"

"Worse!" gasped the bewildered and frightened speculator, let into the truth by that abrupt change of voice and manner. "Silky Steele!"

"At your service, judge," blandly bowed the Stay-in Sport, with gentle force placing his antagonist back in his chair, then resuming his own seat. "Sorry if I've given you anything like a shock, but I wanted to see you on important business, and I had doubts as to your bidding me welcome were I to come in my own proper person."

"You devil! I'll hang you for this!" panted Ramsey, hoarsely.

"Don't let your tongue run away with your brains, Aaron! If either one of us is fated to pull hemp, I'll lay you odds it isn't *my* funeral!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE JUDGE TAKES HIS MEDICINE.

EVEN then, Judge Ramsey made a feeble fight to save his dignity, although he surely must have seen how squarely the tide had turned against him.

"This is a vile outrage, sir! Because my voice has been lifted for law and order—because I have boldly and honestly declared in favor of executing the law, and swiftly punishing the guilty—"

"Oh, come off the roof, dear fellow!" drawled the Stay-in Sport, with provoking insolence, though his tones were so soft and silken. "I'll admit that you've been playing the fool to perfection, of late days, but you can't make me swallow all that guff. Why, man! if all rascals were to have the dues you pretend to claim for them, instead of being right here, you'd be playing scarecrow out under one of those trees!"

"I don't— What right have you—"

"The right of truth, Aaron Ramsey!" sternly interrupted Slocum, casting aside his bantering manner and getting down to business. "And as the quickest method of bringing you to a realization of that, let me give you a synopsis of facts:

"You, while playing honest and almost pious business man here in Camp Climax, are really an ally of Major Nightmare, if not that Satanic rascal himself!"

"I say that you, together with Art. Ricord and Briggs Oliphant, were at the bottom of Sandy McIntosh's murder, and—"

"I never knew—before Heaven, Slocum, I never—"

"Will you button up, judge? Every charge I bring forward has ample proof to back it, and your only show for cheating justice is to play the cards I deal out for you. The main question is, have you got good sense enough left to see and do this much?"

"What do you wish me to do?" mumbled the cowed wretch, yet even then trying to save his boasted honor by hastily adding: "Not that I admit your horrible charges, for—"

"Never mind repeating all that rot, judge," coldly interposed the Stay-in Sport. "I've not come here to drive you clear across the border line. I'm not a professional thief-taker, and as long as I can carry my own game through with ease, I'm willing to let others play their hands as best they may. In other words, I'll give you a show to pull out of this bog, without a rope helping you!"

Judge Ramsey shifted uneasily in his chair. He longed to ask just what manner of chance Silky Steele meant, but he feared to speak out, lest he convict himself.

The Stay-in Sport read as much by his flushing and paling face, and after a brief silence, he spoke again:

"I'll be perfectly honest with you, Ramsey. While I know just what manner of scoundrel you really are, I have come here to enlist you as an ally, rather than to face you down as an enemy. Will you meet me on that level, or must I pinch you with the rest of the outfit?"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"To acknowledge your mistake, and tell the plain truth. You lied when you told about town that you had proofs to show I was Major Nightmare. You lied again when you declared that Peter Bell was of that evil gang. Of course I'm bound to clear off my own record, and I mean to clear Peter and his squaw, as well. You can help me do this, if you see fit, and by so acting, not only save yourself some mighty ugly questions, but line your pockets into the bargain!"

"If I yield, you'll not—not—"

"As I said before, I'm no thief-taker. Just so the head devil comes to grief, the lesser rascals may save themselves if they know how."

"On your word of honor?"

"I doubt if you know the meaning of that word, Ramsey, but if nothing else will tempt you—yes, on my word of honor!"

"Then I'll submit to what I can't avoid, with the best possible grace," said Ramsey, with a forced laugh and a very sickly smile. "What am I to do, first?"

"Go over to the hotel with me, to be introduced to some friends of mine," promptly replied Slocum, rising to his feet.

"This isn't—you're not playing to trap me, man?"

"Don't be an ass, judge. Haven't I got you trapped already, if I wanted you that way?"

"Then I'll go, but—"

"And go like a lamb, judge, or I'll turn wolf! If you are thinking of cutting up rusty, don't you do it, man! If you kick up a row, and think to slip my grip by calling help, I'll drop you cold, and trust to my luck for explaining matters in time to save my own self. *Sabe?*"

"I've passed my word, and I'll keep it, sir," stiffly bowed Ramsey.

"See that you do. Now, we'll promenade outside, old fellow!"

Passing from the office, Silky Steele locked arms with his captive while passing through the dim streets, on his guard against trickery.

Nothing occurred to cause trouble, however, and the hotel was reached without delay. And passing immediately up the stairs, with Judge Ramsey sent a pace or two in advance until the corridor was gained, Steele Slocum knocked at a chamber door, which promptly flew open.

"I've taken the liberty of bringing you a visitor, Mr. Wandell," said the Stay-in Sport, deftly pushing the judge into the little room. "Judge Aaron Ramsey, permit me to introduce you to Philebert Wandell, Esquire, and Miss Eleanor, his daughter!"

The judge mumbled something, he never knew just what, as he gazed from face to face with an air of bewilderment. These were not the people whom he had expected to be confronted with, and yet—

"Whether or no we are pleased to form his acquaintance, depends on Judge Aaron Ramsey himself," coldly spoke the old man who stood so proudly erect before that bewildered gaze.

"Well, he has promised to talk white, if you'll let him into the secret of your gold find, Peter," laughingly explained the Stay-in Sport, closing the door behind him.

"Not—Cracked Bell?" gasped Ramsey, unable to believe his ears, so completely had a barber and clothier transmogrified the one-time mountain vagabond. "And that surely isn't—Injun Molly!"

"Miss Eleanor Wandell, who was disguised as an Indian, just as you were disguised as an honest, reputable citizen of Climax, judge," pointedly interposed the Stay-in Sport. "In other words, I brought you here to make a business compact with your betters, not to try your wits with me in twitting on facts."

"I didn't mean any harm, I'm sure, only—I couldn't believe the evidence of my own senses To think that—"

"Thinking barred, judge, when it takes any direction save plain business. As you're hardly in fit condition to do the matter full justice, suppose you let me state the situation to my friends here?"

Without waiting for permission to be granted him, Silky Steele briefly ran over the agreement to which the judge and himself had arrived that same evening, then added:

"The whole thing amounts to just this: Ramsey will publicly retract his lies, when the proper time comes for dealing out the last hand. He will explain his conduct as best he can; with *that* point we have nothing to do. He will bear evidence against Major Nightmare, when that worthy rascal is unmasked, and he agrees to tell everything he knows that can in even the slightest degree help clear the innocent and bring the guilty to justice."

"And on your side—"

"I'm just coming to that, judge. On our side, we agree to make known to Aaron Ramsey the secret bonanza which Peter Bell has been working for the past two or three years. We agree to give the judge a quarter-interest in that claim, be the same more or less valuable. Am I right, so far, Judge Ramsey?"

"Yes, but—the bonanza? It isn't worked out?" anxiously asked the avaricious rascal, trembling with mingled hopes and fears.

"Not a bit of it! Just skimmed over the surface, and if properly worked, I reckon we'll all of us grow too mighty rich for breathing ordinary, every-day atmosphere!" laughed the Stay-in Sport.

"Then it's all right, and I'm fighting on your side, tooth and toe-nail!" almost boisterously declared the judge; but the hands which he proffered remained unclasped.

They might use him, but they drew the line at show of friendship!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BROUGHT TO A FOCUS.

"MASON'S" was under full headway that same evening, and business had not been better for many a long day.

Nearer the rear of the apartment, round tables were occupied by the poker-players, lost to all else, so deeply absorbed were they in the fascinations of "our national game!"

At one of the poker-tables John Edgar was seated, together with three others, thus forming an ideal party.

Directly opposite the ex-cowboy sat a man of middle-age, who looked the thoroughbred gambler in every respect. He was a little above the medium height, as regards Westerners, built for activity as well as strength, both of which characteristics were fairly well displayed by his rather gaudy yet perfectly fitting garb.

"Your deal, Ricord," said Edgar, pushing the cards nearer the sport as he added: "But if you want the game to last much longer, pray don't hit us quite so hard this time!"

"There is no friendship in business, gentlemen," smoothly retorted the gambler, his long, white fingers mixing the cards with admirable skill, then passing them to his left for cutting.

Just then a little murmur as of interest or surprise ran through the group nearest the door, and as Ricord mechanically glanced in that direction, while his supple fingers sent the cards flying in rotation to his fellow-players, he gave a slight frown as he recognized the trim, dapper figure of Billy La Rue.

No love had ever been lost between the two gamblers, from their first meeting. There had been no open dispute, much less quarrel between them. Each instinctively recognized the other's caliber, and knew that a quarrel could never end bloodlessly between them.

Ricord dropped his lids as he saw La Rue leisurely moving toward that end of the room, and in that aversion he lost a point in the game that was even then being played for heavy stakes.

For, back of the dapper little sport, pausing just inside the door, running his cool, keen gaze over the occupants of the goodly-sized apartment, stood the man for whom that sound arose.

No one who had ever formed his acquaintance—and few were gathered beneath that wide roof but had done so—could have mistaken that graceful, athletic figure, that strong yet handsome face. True, the trimly-kept imperial was gone, leaving an unhealed wound where it had been, but all the other characteristics of "Silky Steele, the Stay-in Sport," were present.

A smile curled his red lip as he heard that murmuring buzz, for right well he knew its meaning. If they had dared, those fellows would have set up a yell of denunciation against the man who had been tongue-branded

as the notorious road-agent and outlaw, Major Nightmare!

Contrary to his usual custom, Silky Steele made an opea display of his weapons. His trim waist was girded with a leather belt, supporting a brace of revolvers, the butts of which were in handy proximity to the hands which he was resting on his hips.

"Silky means business, an' I'm gwine fer to duck under table!" one of the shrewd notetakers confidentially whispered to his mate, as the Stay-in Sport moved forward, having completed his preliminary inspection.

Possibly it was mere chance that led Billy La Rue to pause directly in a line with the door and the table where Art. Ricord was playing poker with John Edgar for his opposite, but if so, it was very convenient for Silky, whose leisurely approach was thus hidden from the gambler whom he had marked down as his next antagonist.

With a gently firm touch, Steele removed the little sport to one side, then stood at ease, his peculiar smile broadening as one of the players gave a sharp ejaculation of surprise at recognizing the proscribed gambler.

"See anything that don't— Go on with your game, Arthur, dear boy! I wouldn't interrupt your sport for millions!"

Silky Steele changed his words to suit. Ricord had looked up with a start at sound of that smooth, purring voice, and Slocum met him with a smile that was only less mellow than his tones.

A more complete surprise could hardly have been suffered, and the scar-faced gambler realized as much, though not a changing muscle bore witness to that fact. He saw where Slocum's hands were, and though his fingers were still empty, he knew how swiftly they could draw and fire, in case the need arose.

That same glance showed him John Edgar, very white as to face, seemingly afraid to turn his head for a glance at the owner of that voice. Evidently he could hope for no assistance from that quarter, unless he could effect a diversion under cover of which the ex-cowboy might get in his fine work.

"You are interrupting sport, Silky," coldly retorted Ricord. "If you want a hand in, why don't you say so?"

"Thanks, but I never play cards," blandly responded the Stay-in Sport, paying no attention to other than the man with the scar, leaving all the rest to faithful Billy and his squad of true-hearts. "And I'd never have risked my good name by entering a gambling establishment, only for the fact that I was told *you* wished to see me."

"I'll see you later, Silky. I never mix pleasure with business."

"In which you're just like me, for I do! Come up to the rack and take your fodder, Artie! Did you or did you not give out in Climax that your dearest wish in life was to win an interview with me?"

"Is it a quarrel you're looking for, Silky?"

"What, with the entire gang of your fire-eaters!" ejaculated the Stay-in Sport, his gray eyes widely distending with mock amazement.

"I'm standing on my own bottom, Slocum, and I reckon I'm able to fight my own battles. How many heelers have you brought with you?"

"Have you left a single honest man in all Climax, then? Was there even one poor, lone, miserable white man whom your soft-soaping tongue couldn't win over to your side, Arthur Ricord? Is that question on a par with your statement that you're standing alone to face me down?"

"I am alone, but—"

"Wait, Arthur, pet, and let's analyze that assertion, just for luck," coolly interrupted the Stay-in Sport. "And, to get at it properly, let me begin with a question: I understand you charge me with being Major Nightmare, chief of the Bad Dreams; is that your position?"

"Dare you stand trial, and can you prove you are not guilty?"

"Now you're getting down to the pay-dirt, Artie, and I'm coming back at you with my analyzation! You and I are only two men, in the common eye, yet we're pretty nearly a host, when the riddle is unriddled!"

"First, there's one honest fellow whom I'll call Silky Steele, the Stay-in Sport, just for luck! Then there's Arthur Ricord, a card-sharp of uncertain caliber. Add to these, one boss of road-agents known as Major Nightmare; one thief, one kidnapper, one assassin, who steals an arrow from a squaw with which to kill a former pard; one gay Lothario, who counts his victims by the score, picking them up from New York to Mexico; one fugitive from justice, originally known in Boston as Basil Imroy, where he is wanted for stabbing to the heart a woman who—"

Thus far Silky Steele had progressed with his cool yet terrible indictment, veiled under a thin riddle, and though Ricord gave no sign of the dread fear which was closing like a grip of ice about his heart, he was meditating a desperate stroke for life and victory.

With a sudden effort, he upset the table with

his legs, throwing himself backward at the same instant, hoping not only to escape the shot which he felt Silky Steele had ready for him, but to win a chance for drawing a gun for his own use.

Swiftly as he acted, however, the Stay-in Sport was with him; in a literal sense, too! For, springing high in the air, Slocum cleared that overturning table, alighting astride the gambler, one hand jerking the pistol from his grip, the other closing on his throat like a vise.

"Back, all of ye!" shrilly cried Billy La Rue, both hands armed, as were those of his picked squad. "It's man to man, and the best man's going to win, without favor—you hear me!"

That was a scene of intense excitement, equaled only by the mad confusion which reigned throughout Mason's. For probably two minutes no one could say how it would all end; then the voice of Steele Slocum arose clear above that tumult, uttering the words:

"Men of Climax! You howled for Major Nightmare, and—*here he is!*"

Art. Ricord, gasping for breath, bruised and bleeding, his garments torn and disordered from that fierce struggle, was lifted to his feet and pushed forward, glittering steel handcuffs confining his wrists!

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SILKY STEELE'S BEST MASCOT.

ALTHOUGH he had not intended so to do, Steele Slocum sent the unmasked schemer straight to his doom, in giving him that impulse.

He had kept his vow of bringing Major Nightmare to bay, and now that the evil one was disarmed, ironed, helpless, he cast him forward as a prize to the sheriff of the county, whom he saw just then passing by Billy La Rue.

But, before the officer's grip could close upon the shoulder toward which his hand was reaching, a gayly-clad figure sprung past him, and struck swiftly and surely at the bosom of the ironed wretch!

"Die, son of a thousand devils! Die, for Rosina, my poor sister!"

Ricord staggered blindly back, giving a hoarse, choking cry, and John Edgar, pistol menacing the bewildered crowd, flung one arm about his disguised wife and forced a passage toward the front door, crying sternly in ringing tones:

"Back, and hands off! *He ruined her sister, and she had a right to kill him! Back, or down me first!*"

"'Twas a foul blow, for he was ironed!" cried Steele, rallying quickly and springing forward. "Still, she is a woman! Make way for her, all! Billy, on deck, pardner!"

"Bet your sweet life!" shrilled the little sport, backing them up at the head of his faithful squad.

That rush would have carried a still more risky point, but the cry of sadly-wronged femininity is never more powerful than among the horny-handed wielders of pick and shovel, and those rough diamonds could hardly clear the way rapidly enough!

No sooner were they fairly clear of the building, than Silky Steele turned to La Rue, hastily muttering:

"You stay back to cover, or to throw on the wrong scent, pardner! It may be that they'll come again, though I hardly think it. If so, don't let 'em come our way!"

"Don't chin so much, but run 'em out of risk, Silky," bluntly answered the little sport, then turning to do his part of the job.

"Come with me, and pick up your feet lively!" almost harshly commanded the Stay-in Sport, gripping Edgar by his free arm. "For her sake, if not for your own, man!"

The ex-cowboy lifted that disguised figure in his powerful arms, following as rapidly as the gambler could lead the way. Nor did they come to a halt until fairly beyond sound or hearing of the excitement at Mason's.

"Now, both of you, I reckon the quicker you shake the dust of this camp off your feet, the safer you'll be," enjoined Slocum, only to have Carmen Diaz cut in:

"'Twas truth, señor? 'Twas the devil's son? Oh, blessed be the Holy Virgin for sending me the vengeance I swore at her shrine!"

"He was Basil Imroy, yes," gloomily confessed Slocum, but looking at husband, not at wife. "I reckon he merited death a thousand times over, but, I must say it!—'twas a cowardly blow, after all!"

"Don't—she is a woman—and Spanish blood!"

"Don't I know that? If she wasn't a woman, I'd hold her for murder! As it is, *you'd* ought to feel for me, Edgar! I had turned him over, helpless, and she— Go, I tell you, man!" with fierce emotion. "Skin out of this, for if you're in sight by day, I'll forget that she is a woman! Go—*while you can!*"

Without a word of reproach or regret, John Edgar lifted his half-fainting wife in his arms, passing away into the shadows of night.

And so they pass out of this record, forever!

Although the avenging knife struck deep, the

man whom Camp Climax had best known as Art. Ricord, lived nearly two days after the vengeful Spanish woman struck so surely for her stolen sister.

Perhaps it was well that death crept over the arch-criminal so slowly. It gave him time to weaken in spirit, even as he weakened in body, and long before his last fluttering breath died away upon his blanched lips, he had made full confession, clearing up all points concerning which he was questioned.

Each and every one of the bold charges flung in his teeth by the Stay-in Sport were true, and were so placed upon record.

He had played the part of Major Nightmare, and his was the hand which had sent that arrow through the heart of poor Sandy McIntosh.

That crime was committed, partly in hopes of getting Peter Bell and Injun Molly into his power, but more to still a tongue which might lay bare dangerous secrets; for the gambler was, likewise, he who had figured as Basil Imroy.

Most important of all was the confession made and signed, before thoroughly reputable witnesses, giving the true story of how Mrs. Wandell came by her death, long ago, in Boston. He, Basil Imroy, had slain her in a moment of frenzy when his last scheme failed; she was true to the husband who doubted her, and had only suffered those unwelcome visits through a fear of bringing evil upon his head from that pitiless villain.

And Steele Slocum was the bearer of that important confession! He placed it in the trembling hands of Philbert Wandell—Peter Bell no longer—and he took his first payment from the willing lips of Eleanor, then gave her another kiss, as he whispered:

"For Injun Molly—God bless her dusky majesty!"

"Majesty, Steele?"

"Ay! for isn't she queen of the Silky heart?"

"And Eleanor, you foolish fellow?"

"Reigns over the *new* Steele Slocum! The old one perishes this day, little lady! Silky Steele is no more!"

"Then, promise me one thing, dearest," murmured Eleanor, yielding to his fond embrace, neither of them giving a thought to the old man, who, however, was far too intensely absorbed in the confession which, after so many long years of exile, entitled him to return to his old home, fearing the gaze and recognition of no mortal man.

"You have only to name it, darling!"

"Then promise me you will never let hair grow here again!" murmured the young woman, her fingers gently touching that still sore chin.

"My mascot, you mean?"

"Take me for a mascot in its place, dear Steele!"

"I will! By these red, sweet lips I make my vow!"

And then he clapped the seal to his pledge, not once, but—

We have no business intruding further, dear reader so come right away!

As already indicated, Silky Steele was not a professional thief-taker, and having made arrangements with the sheriff of that district to be on hand for the purpose of taking charge of Major Nightmare, he washed his hands of the matter after putting Ricord in irons.

That criminal lived long enough to involve many others in the evil deeds which he had set in motion, but not all of them fell into the grip of justice.

Big Elephant, being no longer essential to the clearing of the innocent, was set free, with a hint that only rapid flight could save his neck. He hesitated not on the order of his going, but went at once!

Judge Aaron Ramsey brazened it out, his backbone strengthened by his longing for the promised share in "Cracked Bell's Bonanza." He would have shown greater wisdom had he shared Briggs Oliphant's hasty flight, for enough was fastened upon him to "lay him by the heels" for a round term of years. And the judge was not misjudged!

He had company, too, though none of his fellow-prisoners have played a very prominent part in this story, unless it may be Ben Jeeters. He recovered from the wound Silky Steele gave him, and did his country yeoman service—with chain-and-ball about his ankle!

As for the bonanza, that was put up at auction, and sold for a fair price to a company who "took their chances" of getting their money back out of it.

The Wandells, with Steele Slocum as body-guard, left Camp Climax, never more to return. And there at the old home in the Back Bay district, they form to-day part of Boston's most reputable citizens.

True to his pledge, "Silky Steele" never let his mascot imperial grow out, and, strange to say, never felt the slightest inclination to play cards more!

After all, "Injun Molly" was his best mascot!

THE END.

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